An Introduction to

HINDUISM

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CONTENTS

Preface ix

1. History and Development: Introduction 1
   - The Ancient Phase 2
   - The Mediaeval Phase 3
   - The Modern Phase 4
2. Dharma: Moral and Spiritual Values 6
3. The Caste System 9
   - Asrama-Dharma 11
   - Brahmacharya 12
   - Grahasthya 13

Vanaprastha 13
Sannyasa 14

4. Guru and the Mantra 17
Guru 18
Mantra 19

5. The Scriptures 29
Upanishads 31
Sutras 39
Smritis 40
Puranas 43
Agamas 44
Darshanas 45

6. The Trimarga 47
    Karma Yoga 49
    Bhakti Yoga.. 57
    Jnana Yoga... 70

7. The Gods, Deities and Avataras 79
    The Gods 80
    The Deities 89
    The Avataras... 99
    (including notes on the Mahabharata and the Bhagvadgita)

8. The Isms 155
    Vaishnavism.. 156
    Shaivism... 158
    Shaktism 162

9. Reincarnation 171
Brahman 174
Atman 177
Maya 179
10. The Six Systems 182
The Nyaya System 183
The Vaishesika System 186
The Sankhya System 189
The Yoga System 192
The Mimansa System 203
The Vedanta System 206
11. Saints and Seers 210

PREFACE

Hinduism is a great religion and a way of life for millions of people living in India, Nepal and many parts of the world. It is impossible to describe it in detail in one single volume. This book provides an introduction to Hindu tradition and philosophy and is meant for the general reader as it provides authentic knowledge of this ancient faith in a more easy to understand style. It deals with all the important facets of Hinduism including its brief history; dharma and caste system; guru and mantra; the scriptures; the trimarga; the gods, deities and avatars; the isms including Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism; the concept of Brahman, atman and Maya; the six systems of philosophy and brief notes on important saints and seers. Its publication should go a long way in making this ancient religion comprehensible to the common man.

I am grateful to the publisher, Ms. Mayuri Kaul for making this work available to the public and to Mr. T.S. Tiwari for assisting me in collecting the necessary facts.

S. A.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT: INTRODUCTION

The word Hinduism has come from 'Hindu', which, in turn, was the name given to the faith of the people who had settled in the basin of the river Sindhu. Hinduism, as it exists today, has developed through the ages, but there also a line cannot be drawn. For, a Hindu believes that Hinduism has neither a beginning nor an end. Rather, it has existed since time immemorial. It is based on the Vedas and, conventionally, it has been named the 'Sanatana Dharma'. Sanatana means eternal. Hinduism is a permeating concept or the thought which is all-encompassing. It hardly differentiates between one's spiritual and material existence. In the gamut of Hinduism, none of the traditions has been excluded. In the *Gita,* God Himself says: "All human beings worship according to their nature ...."

Thus, it can be said that every religious man in one way or the other, is a follower of Hinduism. Thereby making it increasingly universal.

The three stages or phases in which Hinduism developed through the ages can be broadly classified into:-

(1) The Ancient Phase,
(2) The Mediaeval Phase, and
(3) The Modern Phase.

(1) The Ancient Phase

The first period of this phase may be said to extend from the earliest times to the birth of Buddha, or roughly from

2000 B.C. to 560 B.C. The second period was from the birth of Buddha to the fall of the Mauryan Empire, or roughly from 560 B.C. to 200 B.C. The third period was from the fall of the Mauryan Empire to the rise of the Guptas, from 200 B.C. to 300 A.D. The fourth period from the rise of the Guptas to the death of Harsha, from 300 A.D. to 650 A.D.; and the fifth period from the death of Harsha to the invasions of Mahmud Ghazni, from 650 A.D. to 1000 A.D.

These five periods constitute what may be called the ancient phases of the development of Hinduism.

(2) The Mediaeval Phase

This phase can be said to begin with the eleventh century and end about the middle of the eighteenth. Its great characteristic, as we shall see, is the rise of a number of theistic systems of thought and the later Bhakti movements.

(3) The Modern Phase

The modern phase of the development of Hinduism may be said to begin with the establishment of the British power in Bengal as a result of the Battle of Plassey, in 1757 A.D. and it continues even today. These classifications, though artificial, are convenient for our purpose.

One of the most important features of Hinduism is that it does not postulate 'do's and don'ts'. In fact, it is very practical and realistic in its approach. Its approach to life is that all men are different in a sense, and that they dwell on different planes of thinking. All have a different intellectual capacity and therefore cannot take the same path, though the goal may be the same. Thus, Hinduism emphasises individual experience and aptitude to determine one's own path. That is why, it ceases to reflect a dogmatic outlook and projects itself as a mere religion. It becomes a way of life.

CHAPTER 2

DHARMA: MORAL AND SPIRITUAL VALUES

Dharma is one of the most important concepts in Hinduism. It is an action oriented concept. That is, dharma guides us in our day-to-day implementation of our planning. It is a law as well as regulation. Dharmasastra by Manu (Manu Smrti) is the text in which we find authoritative codes for general use. There are other Dharmasastras or Dharmasutras also. They all provide for socio-religious and economic behaviour of men in society and serve as guidelines.

In Hinduism, dharma is a wide term and should not be confused with religion or law, etc. The word dharma comes from the Sanskrit root 'dhr', which means 'to support'.

Dharma is that which bears up in some way or the other. Dharma is also used in the sense of "essential characteristic", the basic property, of a thing. In this sense, the dharma of fire is to burn, the dharma of the human spirit is consciousness. Here dharma is a descriptive term and not perscriptive. Conclusively, we can say that dharma has different connotations depending on the context.

In this chapter, we are talking about the socio-religious context, and hence here dharma means 'that which acceptably upholds private and public life', 'that which establishes social, moral and religious order', and so on. Dharma establishes harmony between 'order and chaos', and between 'choice and necessity'.

The dharma of order in chaos discusses the 'varnadharma, asrama-dharma', the object of which is to establish harmony in society. The dharma of choice and necessity is the dharma of individual conduct and character.

In the Rig Veda, it is depicted how out of the cosmic Person (Purusa), different features of our universe were produced. There it has been mentioned that:

"His mouth became the Brahmin,
His arms became those who protect and rule (rajanya),
His thighs became those who trade (vaisya),
From his feet those who serve (sudra) were born."
(Rig Veda)

CHAPTER 3

THE CASTE SYSTEM

Strictly speaking it is not possible to become a Hindu, other than by being born into a caste. That is, both caste and religion are determined at the time of a Hindu's birth.

The Sanskrit word for caste is 'varna' which means 'colour'. However, this is not a valid framework of the 'casta' word or 'caste' (= breed). It was applied originally by the Portuguese to designate the peculiar system of religious and social distinctions. The Indian word for caste is Jati, which gives the sense of 'gens or 'birth'. The four original castes among Hindus are:

(1) Brahmana (the priestly class)
(2) Kshatriya (the warrior class)
(3) Vaisya (the business class) and
(4) Sudra (the manual workers)

According to Manu, the Brahmins are assigned the job of teaching and studying, sacrificing for their own benefit and for others, giving and accepting alms. The Kshatriyas are duty-bound to protect the people, to bestow sacrifices, to study, and to abstain from attaching themselves to sensual pleasures.

The Vaisyas are to tend cattle, bestow gifts, offer sacrifices, study, trade, and cultivate land. These three castes are 'twice born', since each has a ceremony corresponding to second birth; the 'yajnopavit' sanskara (ceremony). In this, they wear a sacred thread. Sudras are assigned to serve all these three castes.

Although there is no fifth class, according to Manu, the remainder of the population has also been in existence as an 'outcaste.

This caste system has been a preserving system in Hindu culture and tradition. It has helped to protect the lives of men. It places them in a larger context. With the changing times, it is not very rigid. The origins of some earlier castes have been forgotten, and various other castes have also emerged. A Hindu can renounce his caste if he becomes a 'sanyasin', or holy man.

Asrama-Dharma:

Asrama means 'resting-place'. This refers to four stages of life. These are:

(i) Brahmacharya, the stage of religious studenthood;
(ii) Grahasthya, the stage of the householder;
(iii) Vanaprastha, the stage of the forest dweller; and
(iv) Sannyasa, the stage of the renouncer.

Brahmacharya:

The one who walks the path of Brahma, in the sense both of the Supreme Reality and of the inherent power of the sacred word, is called a brahmacharin. Here in this stage, the student was ordinarily to reside with the teacher after initiation. He was then trained in a detailed code of behaviour governing his relationships with men and women in various walks of life. He had to follow a strict regimen and was to cultivate especially the virtues of celibacy (of body and mind), truthfulness, obedience, humility and so on.

Grahasthya:

After finishing his tutelage, the student was to give his teacher a fee (guru-dakshina). This made him a snataka. He then returned home. Then he became a householder after marriage. This stage has been said to be a crucial one for it supports the other three. Here he finances and practises Vedic rites, together with his wife. This implied the perpetuation of society and the establishing of world order. The special duties of the householder were summed up in various codes.

Vanaprastha:

From now on the individual, who so wishes, progressively detaches himself from the concerns of the world with a view to achieving serenity in this existence and fulfilment outside the cycle of life. After putting his household affairs in order, he departs to a secluded place. The forest dweller (vanaprastha) is to remain celibate, practising austerity. He is to recite the Veda, becoming more and more of an ascetic.

Sannyasa:

Here in this ashrama, the forest-dweller ceases to tend the sacred fire. Henceforth, fuelled by his austerities, he is to be a living fire, his spirit shining through as a smokeless flame. He wanders from place to place begging for his sustenance. He is to detach himself from material and mental possessions, of everything he owned till now. From here, he can make his final great journey (maha-prasthana) through life.

The dharma of personal conduct and character can be understood in two aspects:

(i) Sadharma-dharma, and

(ii) Sva-dharma

Sadharma-dharma or general morality suggest ways on how one has to behave morally. The different Law Codes imply or speak of a general morality. Here, non-injury (ahimsa), truth (satya), not stealing (asteya), purity (sauca), control of the senses (indriyanigraha) has been declared as the dharma. Sva-dharma is the means of implementing the universal ethic in the different situations and circumstances of one's own life.

To resolve the clash between different rituals which involve animal sacrifice, the individual is to take resort to the different Sastras and his own conscience. Dharma in all the contexts, requires rationality, responsibility and free will. All the ingredients of the central Hindu belief dwell upon: time, nature, chance, necessity, means, end, individual. But Hinduism says that the personal and spiritual growth takes place in everyone's life if he practises dharma.

Conclusively, we find that dharma is a deciding and defining factor in human life. All our actions, if guided by dharma, will lead us to the final liberation (moksha).

CHAPTER 4

GURU AND THE MANTRA

The two forms of divine love are: preparatory and supreme. For the aspirant of the spiritual life, during the preparatory stage certain forms of external help are necessary. One may feel a desire for the spiritual life when struck by a blow from the world, from which he recovers generally. But these momentary impulses should not be mistaken for spiritual yearning. The true devotee of God, though he may possess all kinds of material goods, is not interested in them because he is aware of their impermanent and unsubstantial nature. The purity in thought, word and deed becomes the nature of such an aspirant. He then, seeks the help of a spiritual teacher. Though, God dwells in all men and is their inner guide, the impure thoughts of men usually distort the divine voice. The teacher guides a man to show him the right path. With this the spiritual awakening is quickened. Even the greatest saints and mystics have been helped by a qualified teacher (guru).

Guru

The teacher must have the proper qualifications. He should possess knowledge of the scriptures in order to dispel students' doubts. His most important qualification is that he must have direct experience of God.

He should be free from sinfulness and selfish motives. With infinite patience and love he keeps unfolding the disciple's heart. With such a teacher, the 'spiritual birth' of the disciple takes place. This ideal teacher is indeed rare.

But a less perfect guide may help. With the purity of mind, the pupil finds that God—who dwells in everyone's heart — is guiding him on his spiritual path.

The guru (or teacher) transmits spirituality to the seeker merely by a touch, or a look, or a wish. The less perfect teacher employs some tangible methods. Charged with spiritual power he often uses a sacred word called 'mantra'. The aspirant gradually attains perfection by repeating such a word and contemplating its meaning.

Mantra

"Mananat Trayata Iti Mantrah"

"That which protects from the impact of Maya, the illusory world, is Mantra."

The word Mantra consists of two parts:-
"man" and "tra."

In Sanskrit, "man" means "to think" and "tra" comes from "trai" which means "to free from bondage." The liberation which Mantra brings is that from the samsara or the phenomenal world. However, there can be many levels of meaning in one single Mantra. These levels are understood by experience and not an intellectual explanation.

The concept of Mantra is based on the fact that there is a certain power in every word. Not only word, but every sound has a power in it. Different sounds cause different vibrations affecting one's bodily and emotional response. By the Mantra recitation this sound energy is generated. The energy so generated activates and accelerates the creative spiritual force which, in turn, harmonises the human being. By the practice of Mantra for a long time the person becomes aware of sounds actually creating images, which the particular sound represents.

There are six aspects of Mantra:-

a Rishi, a Raga, a Devata, a Bya, Sakti and Kilaka

(a) a Rishi (seer) of the Mantra is that who first recognised and understood the power of a Mantra and intended this power to be used for mankind.

(b) a Raga (melody) is the sequence of single sounds which creates certain vibrations with the help of the Sabda of the Mantra.

(c) The Devata (presiding deity) of the Mantra is the personal aspect of God. It is one of the forms of the Supreme

Truth and Wisdom.

(d) The Bya (seed) of the Mantra is the essence which gives it special power. This Bya (seed) grows in the person making him a spiritual being.

(e) Sakti (power) is that aspect of Mantra which is present in the form of the consciousness. This increases when the Mantra is repeated by the individual.

(f) The Kilaka (pillar) is the driving force, the persistence and the will-power which is required for the individual to pursue the Mantra. After some time, it becomes a very fine thread joining the disciple to the Mantra.

The practice of Mantra Yoga is the name given to the chanting of the Mantra. This chanting can have three forms:-

(i) When the Mantra is spoken aloud, this is known as Vaikhari Japa;

(ii) When the Mantra is hummed or whispered without letting the words emerge from the mouth, this is known as Upamshu Japa; and

(iii) When the Mantra is repeated in such a way that it goes on in the mind only, it is called Manasika Japa.

A Mantra functions as a device for focussing the ordinarily dispersed powers of the mind to a sharp point. This penetrates through the sifting sands of thoughts to the deeper layers of the mind beneath.

The practice of the Mantra is done with the help of a mala (a garland of beads). The number of beads in the mala is usually, 108. The mala has a special bead called Mount Meru where it is tied together. When, in the process of repetition, the fingers reach Mount Meru, the mala should be turned the other way. The movements of the beads should be between the third finger (ring finger) and the thumb, as the Mantra is repeated with each bead. The practitioner should sit with his spine erect, in any relaxed pose and in a quiet place. There should not be any intellectual judgment to interfere with the practice of the Mantra Yoga.

The use of the Mantra purifies the aspirant's subconscious and improves the powers of concentration.The turbulent and disturbing emotions come to a halt while chanting the Mantra. After some time, there is a complete check over them. The awareness of the lower self, the ego or "body mind" loses itself and the higher self gradually begins to take possession.

AUM (OM)

"OM" or "AUM" is the Cosmic sound which is the origin of all other sounds and is itself a Mantra. It is composed of three letters — A A, O, (M). The sound (nada) of AUM is the Power which is the cause of the Universe. And after the creation also, this Primordial Power is always operating through the three aspects of it. Rudra is the power behind chemical destruction, breaking down of the material compositions and combinations either to Mahabuta (general elements) or to Prakriti (the formless substance). Brahma is the power which creates the matter anew and vitalises it to different forms. Vishnu is the power who maintains the matter in the midst of these conflicting forces, thereby maintaining all Existences. All these Powers are concentrated in AUM. Thus, AUM is the representative of the Vital Potential of the Universe and of the Trinity of the Energies. By meditating on AUM, the individual's mind is illumined by spiritual reality.

HARI OM

This Mantra has a power to heal. "Hari", is a Sanskrit word, which means "taking away." Thus, the chanting of this Mantra takes away all the offences, errors and follies and the consequences thereof. The purpose of Self-Realisation is achieved with this Mantra. This Mantra preserves the human body and the mind in the best state of health.

This Mantra is most powerful from midnight until three o'clock in the morning. During this period, the individual can have a spiritual experience because of the vibrations around space.

OM NAMAH SHIVAYA

This Mantra calls on Lord Shiva. To overcome the ego, which is the cause of our ignorance and illusion, the individual is required to surrender to the compassionate Lord Shiva, who dispels the selfishness and jealousy impeding our development. The Power of Destruction of the Lord works as a blessing to the individual.

For practising this Mantra, it is helpful to have a picture or image of Shiva in front. It brings the feelings of emotional detachment and removal of fears, and a state of complete silence.

THE GAYATRI MANTRA

The Gayatri Mantra is the most sacred of all Vaidika Mantras. It is as follows:-

"Om Bhur bhuvah suah
tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah prachodayat"

"Om. The earthly, ethereal and celestial.

Let us meditate on the wondrous Solar Spirit of the Divine Creator. May He direct our minds."

This Mantra has immense power to deliver anything upon the aspirant. The chanting of this Mantra directs our inner faculties along the true path.

CHAPTER 5

THE SCRIPTURES

The Hindu scriptures are of divine and primaeval origin. All the knowledge in Hinduism comes from the common source, the Vedas. The Vedas are divided into four sections:

1. Samhita
2. Brahmana
3. Aranyaka, and
4. Upanishad

The four Vedas (Rig, Sam, Yajur and Atharv) have these corresponding sections. Among the four scriptures mentioned, samhita is the earliest. The Rig Samhita was written before the other Samhitas. Before this there were only the Sruti. Sruti literally means what is heard. Sruti is revealed scripture. The Rishis heard the eternal truths and passed them to their disciples. The Smriti is the human record of traditions. The author or authors of Smriti are human unlike the Shruti which is a divine revelation. The above mentioned four (Rig Veda, Sam Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda) scriptures are the Shrutis. After the Rig Samhita, the other three Samhitas were revealed and then set down to writing in metrical form. The Samhitas are a collection of mantras or hymns.

The Brahmanas are an explanation of mantras and rituals. Then came the Aranyakas, which were composed in the forests (Aranya = forest).

Upanishads

Upanishads are the 'revealed cosmogenic and philosophical treatises.' They are the foundations of Hinduism. There are 13 main Upanishads:-

(i) Aitariya
(ii) Brhadaranyaka
(iii) Chandogya
(iv) Kausitaki
(v) Kena
(vi) Taittiriya
(vii) Katha
(viii) Mundaka
(ix) Svetasvatara
(x) Prasna
(xi) Mandukya
(xii) Maitrayani
(xiii) Isa

The Upanishads seek to extend the law of spiritual universalism to the utmost bounds of human existence. The goal here is not a heavenly state of bliss or rebirth in a better world, but freedom from the objective, cosmic law of Karma. They emphasise the object to identify with the supreme consciousness to achieve freedom. The eternal questions like:

What is the cause?

Why is there this something, rather than another?

Whence are we born?

have been traced and answered in the Upanishads. Upanishads are Brahma-knowledge by which ignorance is destroyed. They give us both spiritual vision and philosophical argument.

(i) Aitareya Upanishad

The Aitarya Upanisad belongs to the Rig Veda. The purpose of the Upanishad is to lead the mind of the sacrificer away from the outer ceremonial to its inner meaning. There are three classes of men who wish to acquire wisdom. The first consists of those who have turned away from the world and who are eager for freedom. This Upanishad is intended for these. There are others who wish to become free in a gradual way by attaining to the world of Hiranya-garbha. For them the knowledge and worship of prana (breath of life) is intended. For those who care only for worldly possessions, the meditative worship of the Samhita is intended.

(ii) Brahadaranyaka Upanishad

This Upanishad is generally recognised as the most important of the Upanishads. It is a part of the Satapatha

Brahmana. It has three Kandas or sections. The Madhu Kanda expounds the teaching of the basic identity of the individual and the Universal Self; the Muni Kanda provides a philosophical justification of the teaching; and the Khila Kanda deals with certain modes of worship and meditation.

(iii) Chandogya Upanishad

This Upanishad belongs to the Sama Veda. It has ten chapters. The first two chapters deal with sacrifices and their forms of worship. The eight other chapters are the Chandogya Upanishad.

(iv) Kausitaki Upanishad

Kausitaki Upanishad or Kausitaki Brahmana Upanishad deals with rebirth, the release through knowledge, sacrifice of self, etc.

(v) Kena Upanishad

Kena Upanishad belongs to the Sama Veda. It has four sections. The first two are in verse and the other two in prose. The subject of this Upanishad is the supreme unqualified Brahman and the supreme as Ishvara (God). It says that the knowledge of the absolute which secures immediate liberation is possible only for those who are able to withdraw their thoughts from worldly objects and concentrate on the ultimate fact of the universe. The worshipper acquires the higher wisdom gradually, which results in the consciousness of the identity with the supreme.

(vi) Taittiriya Upanishad

This Upanishad belongs to the Taittiriya school of the

Yajur Veda. It has three sections called Vallis. Siksha Valli is the science of phonetics and pronunciation; Brahmana Valli and Bhrigu Valli deal with the knowledge of the supreme self (Paramatma-jnana).

(vii) Katha Upanishad

Katha Upanishad belongs to the Taittiriya school of Yajur Veda. The oft-quoted Nachiketas story is from this Upanishad. The Upanishad has two chapters, each of which has three Vallis or sections. Some passages are common to the *Bhagvad Gita* and the Katha Upanishad.

(viii) Mundaka Upanishad

This Upanishad belongs to the Atharva Veda. It has three chapters with two sections each. The Mundaka Upanishad states the clear distinction between the higher knowledge of the supreme Brahman and the lower knowledge of the empirical world. By the higher wisdom only and not by sacrifices or worship one can reach Brahman. The sanayasin who has given up everything, can only obtain the highest knowledge.

(ix) Svetasvatara Upanishad

This Upanishad belongs to Yajur Veda. It is theistic in character. The Supreme Brahman is identified with Rudra who is conceived as the material and the efficient cause of the world. This Upanishad teaches the unity of souls and the world as the one Supreme Reality.

(x) Prashna Upanishad

This Upanishad is a part of Atharva Veda. It has six sections which deal with six issues. The questions put to a sage by his disciples have been answered. The questions are related to the nature of the ultimate cause, the power of aum, the relation of the supreme to the constituents of the world, etc.

(xi) Mandukya Upanishad

The Mandukya Upanishad is also a part of the Atharva Veda. It has twelve verses. This Upanishad is an exposition of the principles of aum as consisting of three elements a, u, m. The three elements refer to the three states of waking, dream and sleep without dream. The Supreme Self is manifested in the universe in its gross, causal and subtle aspects. It is said that the Upanishad by itself, is enough to lead one to liberation.

(xii) Maitri Upanishad

This Upanishad belongs to the Maitrayaniya shakha (branch) of the Yajur Veda. It has seven chapters. Here we have a reference to the trimurti concept of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

(xiii) Isa Upanishad

The Isa Upanishad or the Isavasyo Upanishad belongs to the Vajasaneyi school of the Yajur Veda. The purpose here is to teach the essential unity of God and the world, being and becoming. It teaches us that life in the world and the life in the divine spirit are not incompatible.

Besides these, there are other Upanishads too, which are not very important.

Sutras

After the above literature comes the Sutras. They are the codes of life. The Sutras are of four types:

(a) Sruta (for the major, communal sacrifices);
(b) Grahya (for the minor, family sacraments, like ceremonies at birth, marriage and death);
(c) Dharma (for the conduct governing the four ashramas*)
(d) Shulva (for the sacrificial architecture)

*The four ashramas are:-

(1) Brahmacharya — studenthood;
(2) Grahasthya — householder's life;
(3) Vanaprastha — retirement to the forest;
(4) Sanyasa — hermithood.

Smritis

Smritis derive their authority from the Shrutis. They are generally the expansion and exemplification of the principles and thoughts of the Vedas. The Smritis consist of:

(1) Smritis or codes of law;
(2) Itihasas or epics;
(3) Puranas or chronicles and legends; and
(4) Agamas or manuals of worship; and
(5) Darshanas or schools of philosophy.

The codification of the laws for regulating the Hindu society was done by Manu, Yajnavalkya, Parasara and Vijnaneswara. They have given detailed instructions to all classes of men regarding their duties in life. These are also called Dharma Sastras. The present law makers still follow the spirit of these Dharma Sastras.

The two well-known epics of the Hindus are —

Ramayana by Valmiki and *Mahabharata* by Vyasa.

The ideal characters like Rama and Sita are present in the *Ramayana*. They are individuals with whose assistance various moral and social issues and the conduct of man have been taught. The *Mahabharata* is an encyclopaedia of Hindu Dharma. It is called the fifth Veda. It has many stories, descriptions, discourses and sermons. One of the most important parts of it, is the *Gita*. The *Gita* or the *Srimadbhagvadgita* is in a dialogue form. The dialogue is between Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield before the commencement of the great war of Mahabharata. The origin of moha (illusion) of Arjuna, its dispelling by Krishna is so well given that it summarises all the philosophical and the ethical teachings of Sanatan Dharma or Hinduism.

Puranas

The Puranas consist of chronicles, legends and geneaologies of kings and gods. These scriptures deal with ideal truth. They give one of the very important ideas in Hinduism, i.e., the account of Avatars or incarnations of Vishnu. The roots of this idea are found in the Brahmanas, but they are fully developed in the epics and the Puranas.

The aim of the Puranas is to impress on the minds of the populace, the teachings of the Veda. Traditionally there are eighteen Puranas and an equal number of subsidiary Puranas. The two most popular Puranas are the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavata Purana. They deal with the Hindu tradition (as well as mythology).

Agamas

Agamas in a narrower sense, denote the sectarian scriptures dealing with the worship of a particular aspect of God with the instructions for the worshipper. However, they also reveal the essential truths of the Veda. Accordingly as the deity that is worshipped (Vishnu, Shiva or Shakti), the Agamas are divided into three classes. This has given rise to the three main branches of Hinduism, namely Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism. In spite of their diversity in forms and methods of worship, the Agamas are Vedic in spirit and character. Together they bring religion to the hearts of the common people.

Darshanas

The Darshanas are the schools of philosophy based on the Veda. They are meant for the scholar and their appeal is to the logical understanding. There are six Darshanas. They are:

1. The Nyaya
2. The Vaishesika
3. The Sankhya
4. The Yoga
5. Purva Mimansa, and
6. Uttara Mimansa

They consist of a number of Sutras or aphorisms. We have many notes and commentaries on each of the Darshanas.

Badarayana's Vedanta is considered the most satisfactory system of philosophy. The first four Darshanas rely too much on human reason. But by the higher evolution we realise that our reason is a very inadequate instrument in matters that lie beyond this world. The fifth, Mimansa accepts in entirety the authority of the Veda. The Vedanta Darshana supersedes all these other Darshanas for it either does not accept or partly accepts the Veda.

The aim of all the scriptures is to make man a perfect spirit and one with Him. They help develop our intellect and raise ourselves to the higher planes of thinking. They are the guide to human beings along the path of ascent that leads to God.

CHAPTER 6

THE TRIMARGA

After the knowledge of the ultimate goal of life, i.e., God, we need a way to achieve this goal. Hinduism, as a way of life, provides a total solution to this, for humanity. Three ways have been enumerated. They are called the "Trimarga". Trimarga means three ways or three paths. They are all equal, and one should not think about the superiority of one over the other.

The problem of 'what to do' and 'how to do' always haunts our minds. It is equally baffling to the peasants as well as the intellectuals. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna was well aware of both his 'varna' and 'ashrama' but was confused as to the right course of action. He found himself unable to justify the killing of his kith and kim. These days, it is more common a phenomenon to observe. The present day man remains in that very state of confusion and dilemma on almost all the occasions. He ***fails*** to choose the right path in both his public and personal life. And in the end, he chooses the 'lesser' wrongs! In his existence in the world, and his activity in worldly affairs, he wants a justifiable principle to justify his acts. His mind gets baffled when he thinks of the world's ways of recognition and his work towards the ultimate goal. Hindu scriptures prescribe various modes of carrying on the daily activities. The paths so prescribed are the three Margas or three Yogas. They are:

Karma Yoga or Karma Marga;
Bhakti Yoga or Bhakti Marga; and
Jnana Yoga or Jnana Marga.

KARMA YOGA

Karma Yoga is the yoga of action. 'Karma' literally means 'action'. But the actions which have been discussed are 'dedicated and selfless actions'. This comes from 'detachment'. But what type of 'detachment'? 'Detachment' from what?

Before delving further into the answer of the question above, let us know the answer to this question: What is 'absolute' or say, permanent or unchanging in this world? Hinduism declares boldly that anything which is psycho-physical is not at rest or permanent or unchanging. In other words, anything which is perceptible is not permanent. The reason being the transient nature of the perception itself. The scriptures say that anything we call 'ours' is impermanent. Only the 'I' is permanent. But this 'I' is not the same as the 'I' we use. In the morning after rising from bed one says, 'I slept well'. Who is this 'I'? Certainly it is not the body or mind which was working the whole day and lying in bed at night. It was not the same 'I' who was aware of this sleep. The scriptures say that it is the 'I' in us which was aware even when we were sleeping. This 'I' was the witness to our daily activities. This 'I' who witnessed all the moments, is the Atman. The Atman, is imperishable, never-changing, unaffected by anything and all-pervading. It is perfect knowledge.

In your daily life when there is a situation which is like a quagmire or maze, we tend to philosophise about such matters. Why? Not because we want to escape. In fact, it is the only resort we find worth going to. It is the Atman which wants us to know the root of the matter. Arjuna was in such a state of maze or dilemma on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Then Krishna said: "Go to the world, with full consciousness that you are the Atman, and therefore you can never be tarnished by these feelings of joy and sorrow, ...". Here he is referring to 'detachment' which does not imply 'ineffectiveness'. But it is the involvement with everything that goes on but at the same time one is aware that one is detached. Here, Hinduism prescribes different prescriptions for different seekers. For those who have reached the fourth stage of life, i.e., the sanyasa stage, retiring to the forest and seeking communion with God is the prescription. But for those who have not reached that stage, the attitude of detachment has been prescribed. This attitude comes with the practice of having the detached feeling and still being in the world. In other words, man should make an effort to overcome the anxiety which always follows attachment. He must overcome that anger which comes as a consequence of non-fulfilment of this desire. Rather, he should go about his duties for the sake of duty and should not claim authorship or ownership for himself. Then only will he be free of experiencing the resulting pain or pleasure thereof.

He should not have the desire to attain pleasure by getting a certain desire fulfilled, nor should he have the experience of pain even if he fails to get a certain desire fulfilled. However, it never means that one has to be a fatalist. The purpose is to be aware that neither the good nor the bad keeps one in bondage. It is very important to keep in mind that the real evil lies not in physical possessions, but in attachment to them. The indication is to get rid of the selfishness which is nothing but a consequence of attachment to physical possessions. Performing one's duties in this way, one becomes a Karma Yogi. A 'Karma Yogi' believes in doing his own job sincerely to the best of his ability. Even if he does not get properly rewarded for his efforts, he does not rebel. But even then, he cannot be said to be a conformist. He can very well be a person striking a new path in the service of society. This man, then, has no personal ambitions except his duty binding nature. Then he works for the society in particular and humanity in general. Thus, he identifies himself with a cause and not with a person (even himself). He works with a social purpose in mind and without any self-interest. This selfless work becomes 'Yajna', which means any action done for the good of others, done without desire or attachment. Thus a detached action means Yajna which is involvement in action but being free from the bondage of it.

In a Yagna, both good and bad 'vasanas' (tainted desires), get eradicated. Thus Hinduism has given a clear recipe for breaking of the vasana-led action which takes one down the scale of 'samsara' or the phenomenal world. The *Gita* says: 'Do your assigned duty and do it in the spirit of 'Yagna'. In other words, the duty itself loses its importance. At this stage, liking the duty follows the doing of it. Thus the spirit of Yagna purports to be the attitude of dedication, be it as abstract as a social cause or as concrete as one's own kith and kin. A state of equidistance concerning success or failure follows then. Only a mistaken man thinks of retreating to solitude and renouncing the world. The attitude of a 'jnani' can come to that warrior also whose compassion for his kith and kin has got the better of him. In other words, doing one's duty is far more honourable than running away from action for the reason that one dislikes the action. One is not bound by his actions as long as he is acting in the spirit of 'Yagna'.

There is a complex of mutual Yagnas in the world. The Creator Himself ordained human beings to propitiate the divinity in different elements. Only by the sustained Yagnas can the normal behaviour of the elements be visualised. With the help of one's productive potential, one should do this selflessly.

At one place, the *Gita* advises 'to see action in non-action and non-action in action'. This postulates to the truth that reality is not a thing which can be perceived by only one human being. No one can say that it is this alone and not that. Therefore, the jnani sees non-action in action and action in non-action. He remains aware of the Cosmic Power when the world remains ignorant. Thus for this Karma Yogi, who is enlightened in this regard, there is no dearth of strength. Because his strength is being sanctioned by the knowledge itself. He dwells in this world and performs his duties as others do, the only difference being his awareness that he does not allow his acts to be originated from the desires of the mind alone. His actions are determined by the wisdom, making him a 'sthita-prajna'. Being a 'sthita prajna', he gets a total detachment from the world.

Thus, the Karma Yoga exhorts us not to renounce the actions, but to leave off the attitude as the doer. This is called 'nishkama-karma' (desireless action). This purges the mind of the doer. This seems difficult but is not impossible. By dedicating one's actions to God, one attains this stage.

BHAKTI YOGA

Bhakti yoga or the path of devotion is the most popular form of yoga. The reason behind it is its simplicity. Bhakti yoga can be practised by men from all walks of life. However, simply prayer and chanting of names is not bhakti. These are only the initial steps. In the moments of mental dissatisfaction and agony, every man looks for sympathy and shoulders to weep on. He looks around and finds solace in other's words. By discovering the vacillations in these resorts, he turns to nature and then to natural laws. Even here, by his deep penetration into these laws, he wants to look for something which is deeper. This penetration leads him to the Cosmic Power which is God Himself. And a bhakta trusts God only and sees God in action in everything.

In the passage above, we have tried to understand the basis of bhakti. This would be a very ordinary explanation of bhakti but we can look out for its essence also.

The Upanishads attribute no name or gender to the all-pervading God. They teach us that it is the source of all energy and all power including humans. But, since one cannot perceive Him as He is, He manifests Himself in different forms. The idols and the names are merely symbols of His, and at the same time they are also Himself. In the holy scriptures, we find : "Ekam sad, viprah bahudha vadanti." That is, the truth is one. The priests speak of it in different ways. This is because of the transcending nature of God. Therefore, in Hinduism all of us can worship God in whatever form suitable to our true nature. And this happens also according to the stage of evolution one has reached.

Here we need to dwell upon the concept of Ishta Devata (favourite deity). In Hinduism, a man may choose the God that satisfies his spiritual urge and then he may make that God the object of his worship. There it is to be kept in mind that all the different names and the forms of God are merely symbols which point to the only fact that all the forms are different aspects or manifestations of the supreme reality. One should concentrate on, and have a special place for one particular manifestation and this is his Ishta Devata. Our tradition mentions that there are five main types of 'Ishta Devata' worship:

Aditya, the Sun God, or the nine planets as his derivatives;

Ambika, the Mother Goddess, the various forms of Hers are Durga, Lakshmi, or Saraswati;

Vishnu, the Protector-God, or his various avataras;

Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, the primal god of all worship; and

Maheswara, or Shiva.

This, however, is only a broad classification and various other variations of the Ishta Devata worship are there and they belong to one or the other traditions. This variety gives richness to Hinduism and only here we find that it is so particular and specific about every individual under its singular umbrella. The idol or picture on which every Hindu worships is the method by which he invokes God outwardly. Though he may not always be aware that he is worshipping the same Absolute who is all-pervading, all-knowing and all-permanent to all of our souls but his worship brings him closer to that reality. Here, lies the significance of the different rituals of worship. With the help of certain rituals the process of concentration and devotion becomes easier. Different postures of the body and the movements of the parts of the body, such as the hands, face, eyes, etc. make offering in symbolic ways. The purpose here is not to be adept in these movements, but to help oneself in gaining concentration and becomes one-pointed. They train the body and the mind to have the devotional feelings. This is where, it has been said, that "whereas 'karma yoga' can be practised mainly by persons who have the conscious knowledge to see through these symbols, 'bhakti yoga' can be practised even by people who may not be highly convinced about the 'karma theory.' Bhakti yoga is the one path which is available to all, irrespective of caste, creed, age or education. There are no yardsticks. We have several examples of 'bhakts' who include Mira, Kabir and Nanak. They practised bhakti yoga. Thus we note that it is this path of bhakti yoga which is open to all, including saints and sinners.

Evolution of Bhakti Yoga

Hinduism mentions three stages of bhakti, through which an individual has to rise. The first is 'bahya bhakti' or external bhakti. The basis of this bhakti is the tamasik feeling that God is external to us and that He has fixed dwellings only, like a temple, a holy place, etc. The creation of different images and pilgrimages symbolise this only. Various festivals and rituals do the same. All these help in the adoration of something outside oneself.

Ananya bhakti is the second stage which is rajasik in feelings. That is to say, one worships one's ishta devata in one's heart. This is comparable to monotheism. However, since it is very intense, it clears the mind of the bhakta from the traps of superstitious beliefs and practices. Tulsidas in his 'Ramcharitramanas' has explained this. The bhaktas who are devoted to their own God, do not become intolerant towards the beliefs of others. They also recognise that the gods whom others worship are only different in forms. Hinduism itself, of which this is only a part, accepts that the different forms are different manifestations of the same supreme God.

The third stage of bhakti, is ekanta bhakti. This is considered to be possessed by those who have the purest feelings, i.e., who are 'satwik'. The worshipper here adores God for God's sake and not for his donations. Here the bhakta has no desire of his own. He never even asks for moksha — the final liberation. The bhakta resides in His will only. All his desires and love merge with various modes of nature. He finds a harmony between his own feelings and in all that happens around him. The distinction between this Divine Love and ordinary human love is such that he transcends the barrier of ahankara (selfishness).

tanmanaskas - tadalapah
tad vichestas - tadatmikah
tadgunaneva gayantyah
natma garapi sasmarah
- Bhag. X-30-40

"Their hearts given to Him, they talked of Him alone, they could not think of themselves as different from Him."

Bhakti marga prescribes the path for the Goal which is God, depending on our own levels of evolution and the states of mind. For most of us, the bhakti of Mira and Kabir may not be suitable. So, we need to have an attitude of surrender to Him and create a state of bhakti of our own.

Yamunacharya, in the poem 'Strotraratna' indicates this attitude of total surrender to God:

Pita tvam Mata tvam
dayita - tanayas - tvam priyasuhrit
tvameva tvam mitram gururasi
gatischasi jagatam
tvadiyas - tvad - bhrityas - tava
parijanas - tvadgatiraham

prapannas - chaivam satyahamapi
tavaivasmi - chaivam hi bharah

"Thou are the father, mother, beloved son, dear friend, well-wisher, teacher and the goal—to me and to all the worlds — Thy servant, Thy attendant and a refuge at Thy feet. I remain now, Thy sole responsibility, having offered whole-hearted surrender to Thee."

Expressions in Bhakti

Bhagvata Purana mentions nine forms in which bhakti might be expressed:

Sravanam Kirtanam vishnoh
smarnam pada sevanam
archanam vandanam dasyam

sakhyam atmanivedanam
- Bhag. VII-5-23

Through one's ears, by listening to His names and His glories (shravana);

By the chanting of His names (nama-sdukirtna);

By recalling God and His deeds (smarana);

By waiting on Him (pada-sevana);

By worshipping Him (archana);

By saluting Him (vandana);

By serving Him (dasya);

By being a friend to Him (sakkya);

By dedicating or surrendering to God (atma-nivedana).

Different bhaktas express their bhakti in different ways. Yet in all these forms of bhakti, the love remains the same. It is the love in its purest form, which overpowers the bhakta. Four of the nine forms of bhakti mentioned above, are of more significance in 'kali-yuga'. These are all about the Lord's name and the majesty of His deeds. The present day man is filled with desires and negative emotions, lust and greed and he behaves like an aimless being. God's name is the thread which can lead him to reality. Repetition of His name is a way to turn one's mind inward. Most of us are at an elementary stage of spiritual evolution, and this being a fact, God's name has been held to be the panacea for all ills. Visnu Sahasranama and various other strotras (poems of praise) are the recitations and repetitions of God's name and His glories. The Hindu tradition provides innumerable bhajans for those who are not in a position to read or recite the strotas. In the bhajans that are melodious and rhythmical, we find God's names strung together. Mere listening to them raises one to a state of ecstasy. There is no barrier of caste, creed, sex, to chant bhajans or kirtans. By singing the bhajans or kirtans comes a mental picture of God. Whenever we utter, 'lion', the picture of it is seen instantaneously in the mind. Similarly, by merely saying and repeating His name, we perceive Him. But this is a simple illustration to know the importance of perfect singing of the names of God. By chanting bhajans or kirtans, sentiments pour from the heart which leads to a communion between God and man. The echo of the sound during the chanting gives the feeling of essential unity of God and man to everyone—those who chant or listen to it.

In essence, the Bhakti Yoga or Bhakti Marga requires that the uttering of His name must become second nature to a bhakta. A bhakta must invoke his name with every breath, always and everywhere. He is in the heart of our hearts. His grace depends not on His whim or fancy, but on his being a true bhakta. By being honest in bhakti we can expect His grace.

Jnana Yoga

Jnana yoga is the most difficult yoga. Only the highly evolved intellects can practice it. It is difficult to explain also, for here we cannot draw analogies and examples from our everyday experience. The ones who have traversed and transcended the general run of humanity, can have access to it. This is for the select few who have reached this stage of enlightenment. Even the scholars who have had first-hand experience of it, have described it in contradictory terms. In this brief exposition, let us first know what Sankara has said about this yoga. Sankara's way of looking at jnaṇa yoga, is known as advaita yoga, i.e., the yoga of non-duality. Here the individual merges with the Supreme Reality, that which is Omniscient, Omnipresent and Omnipotent. The morality and ethics of karma yoga, the conviction and devotion of bhakti yoga all lose their meanings here. Here God is seen as He really is, and not as what His relation to the cosmos is.

Here the individual feels as god feels, and one behaves as god behaves. The distance between Atman and Brahman ceases to exist. Atman, the highest within ourselves merges with the Brahman, the reality behind the cosmos. As soon as the identity is established, the two terms become interchangeable. The only thing which one can say about God, then is:- God exists, God is a permeating being. He abides in all the beings and at the same time all abide in Him. In our everyday experience, the 'subjects' of perception are known in relation to 'objects'. But to know Brahman this experience is not entirely appropriate. Taittiriyopanishad says: Satyam Jnanam anantam brahma.

— Tait. V - II-1.

That is, Brahma is truth, knowledge and infinite. Here jnanam means not mere knowledge but consciousness itself, the Absolute Consciousness. Brahman, therefore, is not an object of understanding in the ordinary sense. The categorisations of cause and effect, form and substance, takes us nowhere if we want to understand the Brahma.

The Kenopanished says —

“Yadi manyase suvedeti dabhramevapi nunam
Tvam vettha brahmano rupam Yadasyatwam
yadasya twam yadasya devesu atha
nu mimasyam eva te, manye viditam.”
Kenopanishad: II.2.1.

“He who thinks he knows, really thereby proves he is ignorant. He who realises that he does not know Him has best understood him.” In fact, it wants to warn the mortals to try to interpret him with the help of intellect, but to accept the limit of it. Sankara says, therefore, Brahman is nirguna. Nirguna means attributeless and non-relational. One cannot make a statement out of it. One cannot relate it to anything.

On attaining communion with it, one feels speechless.

All one can say is — "Neti, Neti (Not this, Not this)."

Sankara called this philosophy advaita. He does not accept 'ekatva' (monism), for it gives the impression that it has been acheived by reducing one of two terms placed in opposition to each other. Further, one has no meaning except in relation to the many. According to Sankara, it is not an identity in relation to differences, not a one in relation to the many. All these relational notions are to be rejected. However, the denial of appearances will not in the least affect the underlying reality.

The concept of different orders of reality depends on our experience and perception. With spiritual advancement, one passes to higher and higher states of consciousness; and ultimately reaches the state of Pure Consciousness. This is the Supreme Reality. There is nothing beyond it. This Absolute Ultimate Reality has been called Parmarthika Satya.

Here, the dualism of subject and object is no longer present and there is only the communion. This communion is called nirvikalpa samadhi.

In the absolute itself, there is neither space nor time. It is beyond the causation. Here the origin of time, and space cause lose the meaning of the question itself. What we call time or space are the parts of the mind related to our existence. What we are talking about is anadi (without beginning).

The following is one of the hundred verses of Sivananda-Lahiri, Sankara's glorification of the ecstasy which one attains when one is lost in worshipping the Lord: —

"nityam soodarapuranaya
sakatan uddiya vittasaya
vyartham paryatana karomi
bhavateh sevam na jane vibho
mojjanmantaa punya paka
balatastvam sarva sarvantarah
tishtasywahi tena va parupate
te rekshaniyo, smyaham"

"I roam about in vain in search of wealth and food for this little belly of mine, day in and day out. I know not how to serve you, O Lord. But fortunately, by some note of merit in my past births, you are still in my heart as in everyone's and therefore, O Lord of Beings, you should protect me."

my past births, you are still in my heart as in everyone's and therefore, O Lord of Beings, you should protect me."

Here the appeal is for the descent of the grace of God. By the grace of God only will we be able to transcend the visible universe. From the highest standpoint, there is no difference between Ishwara and jiva. But from the standpoint of our daily activity, the differences are real and we know our finiteness and therefore we need to pray. By the rise of knowledge, we can rise above all misery, to regain the state of bliss.

CHAPTER 7

THE GODS, DEITIES AND AVATARAS

Hinduism considers that God is one and unique. He cannot be attributed to any gender. The word used for him is 'Tat' (meaning That). He is also Sat-chit-ananda. 'Sat' means Truth, 'Cht' means Consciousness, and 'Ananda' means Bliss. He is Omniscient. He is Omnipotent. He is Omnipresent.He is the epitome of all truth, knowledge and other great qualities which are even inconceivable for our minds. He maintains the world by the 'silent compassion'. He, by this very nature, is inexpressible.

Knowing this limitation of our minds, Hinduism gives the concepts of many gods, avataras and deities.

THE GODS

Hinduism is a mixture of the highest philosophical doctrines on the one hand, and common form of worship, on the other. A common man may follow it blindly . But a close and careful study of the Hindu scriptures convinces anybody who has some insight that the Vedas and the Upanisads present the philosophical and religious truths in a very lucid manner, whereas the Puranas and other popular Hindu literature contain the same highest wisdom though in the form of images and stories. The symbols of God were created to enable the ordinary man to get some advantage from the ideas which are very fundamental to Hinduism. This not only helps one to understand its inner significance but at the same time inspires and gives the person inner strength. The modern educated Hindu should understand Hinduism and gain knowledge about it.

In this part let me describe the 'Male Trinity' and then the 'Female Trinity' with some views, on them.

The Male Trinity

Brahma (The Creator), Vishnu (The Sustainer) and Shiva (The Benefactor) are jointly called The Male Trinity (Tridev).

"Brahma is the creator of the Universe. "Brahma devanam Prathamah samavabhut vishvasya karta bhuvanasya gopa."

— Mundakopanishad

That is "Brahma is the first of the gods, the creator of the universe and preserver of the world."

The personality of Brahma has two aspects —

The Absolute Brahman and the presiding deity of Rajoguna.

He is Vishvakarma (motive and power of the world), Brihaspati (the great teacher), Hiranyagarbha (the precious womb of the Universe), Prajapati (the benefactor of his subjects) and Brahma (the ultimate being).

The four faces of Brahma are the four basic sources of knowledge. His four arms are the symbols of his omnipotence. He wears a white beard, which indicates antiquity. His vahana (carrier) is hamsa (swan), which symbolises his power of discrimination.

Brahma is the personification of the creative power. He is the creator of the world in every new cycle of existence — after each dissolution. Every creation, its planning, form and its material is decided by Brahma. He is the "Universal Mind."

Shiva is the preserver of the Universe and the sustainer of mankind. Vishnu means the absolute spirit. That which is present in every atom of the creation, that which is the life-centre of all activity, is Lord Vishnu. He pervades the microcosm and the macrocosm.

"Vivesti Vyapnoti caracaam
jagat yah rah vishnu"

"That which manifests itself through every static and dynamic perception of the world is Vishnu."

Vishnu's sitting posture symbolises strict laws. His four arms are the four 'purusarthas', namely, artha (material resources), dharma (duty), kama (desire) and moksha (liberation). The 'shankha' (conch shell) in his hands indicates the cosmic sound. His vahana (carrier) garuda is a representation of periodic, cyclic time. 'Sesha-Naga' on which he rests, indicates endless time. The 'chakra' in his hand symbolises the cycle of movement. This also symbolises the energy in motion.

Lord Vishnu when accompanied by his consort Lakshmi is known as Lakshmi Narayana. In this form, he is the symbol of worldly fulfilment, blessing all.

Shiva is the most popular member of the Male Trinity. His son, Ganesha is worshipped first in almost all ceremonies. His consort Parvati is also worshipped in different names and forms as "Durga", "Gauri", "Annapurna" and "Mahakali". Even the snakes who are with Shiva are worshipped.

Lord Shiva is a representation of the destroyer of evil. The snakes around Shiva symbolise the mysterious timeless ornaments of the cosmic body. His half-open eyes indicate meditation, introspection and self-inquest. The crescent moon on his forehead is a symbol of the evolution of consciousness. The vahana (carrier) of Shiva is Nandi (bull) which indicates activity. The trident in his hand symbolises subjective knowledge. His 'damru' produces, 'Nada' (cosmic sound).

He is present everywhere and His strong arms are ready to protect the devotee. He is extraordinarily alert and is always awakened. He has the ability to nullify the negativities and is wisdom personified. The thoughts of ignorance, fear, lust and temptation do not affect Him.

The Female Trinity

Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge), Lakshmi (the goddess of ultimate goal), and Durga (the eliminator of misery) are called the Female Trinity.

Saraswati is the occean of understanding in which different types of knowledge vibrate.

"Saro vividham jnanam vidyate
yasyam chitau sa Saraswati."

"Where all types of knowledge are present, that ocean is Saraswati."

Saraswati is the source of all learning. She removes all ignorance and promotes all knowledge.

Saraswati's white garments represent purity. The veena in her hands creates the music of life. The book in one of her hands indicates all-knowledge. Her vahana (carrier) hansa(swan) has a power of discrimination.

The different names of Saraswati are Padma, Kanta, etc. According to the functions she has to perform, these names have been attributed to her. Saraswati's fair and gentle appearance gives this message:

"Jnanam Brahman"

"Knowledge is Divine Power."

In a broader sense, she is jnana, ichchha and kriya (knowledge, desire and action).

The word Lakshmi originates from 'Laksya", or "Laksme", which means "goal" in life. She is also Lord Vishnu's consort. Lakshmi has another name 'Sri". Sri means grace and competence. One of Lakshmi's other names is "Kanti" which means purity and shine.

"Yatah Satwam tatah Lakshmi"

"Lakshmi is present where purity is."

The worship of Lakshmi brings worldly wealth, money, power and worldly prosperity. Her carrier owl indicates the darkness of the material world. The fully open thousand-petal lotus on which she sits, symbolises total evolution.

With the grace of Lakshmi comes knowledge, prosperity, capacity to perform beneficial and good acts, and she gives both worldly and spiritual prosperity. With the grace of Lakshmi one purifies one's negative attributes and inclinations and is thus able to kindle the light of knowledge. She is "bhoota dhatri" (bestower of prosperity of all things) and "prema murti" (embodiment of love).

Goddess Durga is the protecting power. The word "Durga" has come from the Sanskrit word "Durga" which means "fort". Thus, the name Durga suggests that Durga is a protective goddess who brings succour to the suffering humanity.

Durga is related to the world of action at the physical, mental and intellectual levels. Her powers are too immense to comprehend. Whoever approaches her as a child, will be full of grace and care.

She rides a lion as a vehicle, which indicates mastery over the situation. Durga is a combination of all the divine forces and invokes a great sense of security. She is worshipped as the Mother.

The Deities

All deities are identical in substance. They are all manifestations through which God is made approachable. The human mind is limited and so is its ability to perceive or conceive. Therefore, for our help we need some forms to which we may attribute the qualities or essences of our perceptions.

In Hinduism, we find different deities representing different aspects of God. However, a deity may assume other qualities, even seemingly opposite ones. And again, any one form of deity may represent more than one quality. Vishnu (the Preserver) can be pictured as the benefactor and Shiva as the preserver. Only a few can understand the essence and the supreme one without any 'signposts' or 'forms'. A yogi is such a one, who seeks to know God directly with concentration and meditation. For propitiating deities, the rituals, the sacrifices and even the repetition of mantras are very essential. A beginner needs a guru who can guide him. There are a myriad Hindu deities, but the following are the ten and the major ones:

The major ones:

1. Brahma
2. Vishnu
3. Shiva
4. Saraswati
5. Lakshmi
6. Durga
7. Ganesha
8. Mahakali
9. Nataraja
10. Sivalinga

We have already talked about the first six under the head "The Gods". The later four are being talked about in this section.

Ganesha

Ganesha is the god who is worshipped first when a new venture is started. With his grace, no undertaking can ever fail for want of support. The name Ganesha or Ganapati means the god of the multitudes. His other name is "Vigneswara" which means "the remover of "all obstacles."

He is also called "Vinayaka" or the supreme leader. This elephant headed Lord represents some of the highest and best ideas in our scriptures. Lord Ganesha is sometimes shown sitting, sometimes standing and sometimes in a dancing pose. He has two consorts, Buddhi (intellect) and

Siddhi (mastery). His two sons are Kshaime (genuine needs) and Labha (gains).

Ganesha's elephant head symbolises steadfastness and endurance. His vahana (carrier) is Musaka (the mouse). This represents vainglory or the pseudo ego of human beings.

Eight avataras of Ganesha are: -

(i) Vakratunda
(ii) Ekdanta
(iii) Mahodara
(iv) Gajanane
(v) Lambodara
(vi) Vikata
(vii) Vighnaraja and
(viii) Dhumravarna

Mahakali or Kali

Mahakali is the power that swallows time to bring the whole play of time in nature to a rest. Kali is the counterpart of Lord Shiva for the purpose of activity in the material world. She is both the goddess of destruction and creation.

The blue colour of Mahakali's body represents Omnipresence. Her digambari (naked) state shows the natural state. She wears a garland of 50 slain heads symbolising 50 letters, the root of all mantras. Her red tongue indicates an active condition slaying Satoguna. She is a dispeller of doubts, eliminator of problems and has a trident in her hand.

However, the mother never really destroys, she creates. She blesses and helps us to see ourselves in the true mirror of her grace.

Nataraja

The five functions of the supreme are symbolised in the Dance of Nataraja. These functions are:

(i) Shristi (creation)
(ii) Sthiti (sustenance)
(iii) Samhar (destruction)
(iv) Tirobhav
(v) Anugraha (benevolence)

With the Cosmic Dance, the god himself remains hidden. Nataraja is the symbol of the Dance. His four arms stand for the four directions. Damru in one of his hands is a symbol of nada (sound). One of his hands remains in a protective pose blessing humanity. His serene face means self-introspection and composure.

Many forms of Nataraja indicate many forms of dance. The most popular dance form of Nataraja is the Nadant dance (dance of destruction). It has fifteen main types:

(i) Nrit
(ii) Chatur Nritya
(iii) Tal Samphoti
(iv) Bangi Natya
(v) Bhramarait Natya
(vi) Uddand Tandav
(vii) Chand Tandav
(viii) Urdhva Tandav
(ix) Savya Tandav

(x) Maha Tandav
(xi) Paramanand Tandav
(xii) Maha Pralaya Tandav
(xiii) Mahogra Tandav
(xiv) Paribhraman Tandav, and
(xv) Prachand Tandav

Shivalinga

Layam gachhanti Bhutani
Samhare Nikhilam Yatah,
Shrishti - Kaale Punah Shrishti
Tasmaat Lingam Mudahritam."

"That entity in which the whole creation merges at the time of dissolution and out of which it re-appears at the time of fresh creation is called the Linga."

Linga thus stands as a symbol of the Absolute. The forces of the formation of Shivalinga have been explained in "Shivopanishad."

The Linga is made of three parts. The first part remains underground, the middle part remains on the pedestal and the third one is on the top and is worshipped. These three parts symbolise Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The three gunas (Rajoguna, Tamoguna and Satoguna) are also represented in the form of Linga. The Shivalinga also symbolises the three states of Omkar (A, U and M).

Sometimes one, three and five faces are shown on the

Shivalinga. The single face represents the supreme without a second. Three faces indicate the three gunas. The five faces of the Shivalinga symbolise four colours — the front is shown as the colour of burning fire. The back face is shown in bright colour. The two side faces are red and black. The fifth face remains hidden signifying which is beyond perception and comprehension.

The Avataras

The purpose of an Avatar has been described by Lord Krishna Himself in two well-known verses of the Srimadbhagvadgita as:

"yadaa yadaa hi dharmasya glanirbhavati Bhaarata,
Abhyuthanaam adharmasya tadatmaanam srijaamy aham."

"Whenever there is decay of Dharma, O Bharat (Arjuna), and an outbreak of Adharma, I embody myself."

Then again Lord Krishna says:

Paritranaaya sadhunam vinashaya cha dushkritam,
Dharma samsthaapanaarthaay sambhavaami yuge-yuge."
"For the deliverance of the good, for the destruction of the evil doers, for the enthroning of the Right, the Dharma, I am born from age to age."

Thus, we see that the aim of every Avatar is to save the world from great danger or trouble. There are ten major avataras mentioned in the Hindu scriptures. We have taken different views to understand three most popular avataras, viz. Rama, Krishna and Buddha.

Major Avataras

I. Matsya/The Fish

There was a deluge and the ocean engulfed the universe. Then God, to save the Vedas from the demon, incarnated himself as a fish, and rescued the Vedas.

II. Kachhsap: The Tortoise

When the forces of evil were trying to gain 'amrita' (the nectar), God reestablished the balance by taking the form of a tortoise.

III. Shukara: The Boar

To save the world from a demon, Hiran, who had received a boon from Brahma that protected him from any harm form the gods, men and beasts; Vishnu assuming the boar's form, killed the demon with his tusks, and saved it.

IV. Narasimha: The Man-Lion

There was a demon king Hiranyakashipu. He had received a boon from Brahma that he would not be killed by any human being or animal, or god; that he could not be killed in the earth or on the sky, that he could not be killed either out of the house or inside it. To save his devotee Prahlad from this demon, Vishnu incarnated himself as a man-lion, a being which had never existed before. He annihilated the demon at dusk on the threshold of his house by tearing open his stomach with his claws.

V. Vamana: The Dwarf

During Tretayuga, King Bali had extended his kingdom on earth as far as he could. He also took possession of Indra's domain. To relieve the lost kingdom of gods, Vishnu took the form of a dwarf and saved the earth and pushed Bali to the nether world.

VI. Parasuraama

By this incarnation, Vishnu restored the power of the priestly caste in the Tretayuga when the Kshatriyas were ruling. He fought twenty-one battles to kill the Kshatriyas.

VII. Kali

This tenth incarnation of Vishnu is yet to come. In this age where power, money and sex depict the 'qualities' of life, Vishnu will appear as Kali to bring love and truth back on this earth.

Krishna

The concept of avatar gets a unique definition in the life and teachings of Krishna. Here we realise that the eternal avatar in man is his inner divinity. The physical avatar fills another space. Both physical manifestation and the inner development are the ways or means through which the manifestation of the divine in humanity moves.

While describing Krishna, we will not deal with his life-history. We should try to know and understand the *Gita*, which is the Lord's conversation with Arjuna in the famous battle of Mahabharata. This conversation has the power to liberate humanity.

Mahabharata

Mahabharata, the oldest literary work known to mankind, is also called "the fifth Veda." It's author was the sage Vyasa. It has eighteen sections and the most important of all is the

Bhagavadgita.

The story of the epic is woven around the great battle of Kurukshetra, which was fought between the Kauravas and Pandavas.

The head of the Aryan clan of the Kuru, Shantanu got married to a fisher-girl, Satyavati. She bore him two sons — Chitrangada and Vichitravirya.

They were brought up by their step-brother Devavrata Bhishma after Shantanu's death. Chitrangada died earlier, and on his death, the younger brother, Vichitravirya succeeded him. Vichitraviriya had two wives: Ambika and Ambalika. Ambika was the mother of Dhritarashtra and Ambalika was the mother of Pandu. Vichitarvirya had one more son Vidura, from a serving girl or dasi.

Dhritarashtra married Gandhari. The Kauravas, a hundred in number, were the sons of Gandhari. Pandu had two wives: Kunti and Madri.

The Pandavas were the sons of Pandu. Kunti was the mother of the three Pandavas — Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna and Madri had two sons, Nakula and Sahadeva. The five brothers, jointly, are called the Pandavas. Kunti, when she was unmarried, had a son Karna by the Sun God. Karna was brought up by a humble charioteer, Adiratha and his wife, Radha. With the passing of time, Karna grew up into a young and skilled warrior. He was always upright in his dealings, faithful and generous. Though quick-tempered, he was loyal and faithful to his friends and never forgot his promises.

Since Dhritarashtra was blind, Pandu the younger son of Vichitriavirya, was placed on the throne of Hastinapura, after Vichitravirya's death. King Pandu was also a man of frail health.

But the kingdom of Hastinapura was ruled wisely with the help of his half-brother, Vidura and also the uncle Bhishma.

Acharya Drona was engaged as the teacher of the royal princes. Under his patronage, Arjuna became a great archer. However, Duryodhana and his brothers (the Kauravas) hated the five Pandavas. They were jealous of the Pandavas and the love that the people bore them. Bhima was a big strong, simple-hearted boy with a curious sense of humour. Though he never intended any harm or offence to his cousins, Duryodhana used to consider him his special enemy. Duryodhana plotted against the unsuspecting Pandavas and made a palace of wax. He then requested the Pandavas to go and stay there. The Pandavas could not decline for it was the desire of Dhritarashtra, who was also the king. But they were vigilant and aware. With Vidura's help they made their way of out of this palace through a secret underground passage, while the palace was being burnt by Duryodhana's men. In the meantime, the Pandavas reached a dense forest. During their stay here, Bhima married the demon queen Hidimbi who had confessed her love to him, after killing her brother Hidimba. She gave birth to the valiant Ghatotkacha, but by that time, the Pandavas had left the forest. They were now in Ekchakrapura. Here Bhima fought with a giant Bakaura who used to threaten and kill the people of the city. In this city, they heard the news of Draupadi's Swayamvara (a ceremony ·at which a girl chooses her husband). They mingled with a group of Brahmins and reached Kampilya, Drupada's capital. Drupada was. Draupadi's father. Arjuna was recognised by Krishna, who was also present at the ceremony, but he did not tell anyone. On his turn, Arjuna left his seat and drawing the great bow took careful aim at the eye of the fish and darted the arrow. The symbolic contest was thus won by Arjuna. Draupadi was given to him. On arriving at their residing place, they said, "Mother, see what alms we have got today!" From inside their mother answered and told them to share it equally among all five, without the knowledge about the alms. But, in obedience to their mother's words, the five sons decided to take Draupadi as their joint wife.

Thus the Pandavas came out of their exile and went to Drupada's royal palace at his invitation. There they met

Krishna and other kings. The news of their marriage and the alliance with Krishna and Drupada spread rapidly and reached Hastinapura also. Hearing this, Duryodhana become livid with anger and grief. But on Drona's advice, Duryodhana welcomed his cousin home again. They were given a small tract of land called Khandavaprastha, some distance away from Hastinapura. Yudhishthira, with the help of his brothers, turned this barren land into a beautiful city and made it his capital. He gave it the name Indraprastha. On his friends' advice he wanted to perform the Rajasuya Yagna and proclaim himself emperor of the country. But Krishna told him about the challenge which, was in the form of Jarasandha, King of Magadha. He also spoke of his power and strength. The only flaw in Jarasandha's strength was that if his body, torn in two parts, could be thrown at two places, not to come together again, he could die. The bout between Bhima and Jarasandha was arranged in Magadha, on Bhima's challenge. After a long battle, Bhima tore Jarasandha in two parts, crossed his hands and threw the two parts away.

Thus, the pieces moved farther and farther from each other, unable to unite. Thus, the King Jarasandha breathed his last.

After that, Yudhishthira performed the Imperial Sacrifice, the Rajasuya Yagna. After the Yagna and the celebration, Duryodhana stayed on at his cousin's invitation. But the evil minded Duryodhana could not enjoy the time and allowed bitter thoughts to fill his mind. He returned to Hastinapura, to his kingdom. He called on Shakuni, his maternal uncle, to devise a way for the destruction of the Pandavas. Shakuni advised Duryodhana to call Yudhishthira for a game of dice. And then, Yudhishthira was persuaded to attend a gambling match. The match started and one by one Yudhisthira lost all his possessions to Shakuni, who was playing for Duryodhana. He also lost Draupadi. Draupadi, was then brought to the assembly of the court and Dushasana at Duryodhana's command, tried to strip off Draupadi's clothing. But Lord Krishna came to her rescue and saved her from further dishonour. Now, Dhritarashtra, in repentance, summoned Draupadi and asked her to name whatever she wished and promised that he would give it to her. Draupadi asked for Yudhishthira's and the other four Pandava's freedom. On the fulfilment of these wishes, all of them left the palace. Duryodhana was absent during the period. But he again persuaded his father to call the Pandavas back for another game of dice. After much persuasion and blinded by his son's love, Dhritarashtra agreed. The wager for this last gamble was an exile for twelve years and the 13th year in disguise for the loser. The love of dice brought misfortune for Yudhishthira and after losing the game, they all went into exile for twelve years and the 13th (last) year in disguise. The hard life in the wilderness had only one solace and that was the courage of the Pandavas. Here Yudhishthira met Yama, the God of Justice and Death, in the form of Yaksha. The questions which were put to Yudhishthira were answered by him and this pleased the god. He promised that he and his brothers would be protected by heaven in their hardships.

The thirteenth year of the Pandava exile, was spent in the service of King Virata. Here Bhima killed Kichaka, brother of Queen Sudeshma in revenge for the disgrace of

Draupadi. Around the time when the last year of the Pandava exile was to end, Duryodhana attacked the kingdom of Virata. But as the war broke out, the time for the Pandavas to come out was ripe. They fought for the king's son, Uttara Kumar, who was now ruling the kingdom. Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and Subhadra, was given the hand of Uttara, the daughter of the king.

Then in the days that followed, the Pandavas and the Kauravas sent envoys to each other and exchanged messages to secure their claim to the kingdom. But Duryodhana not only ignored them, but also disregarded the wise words of his elders. Even the words of Krishna fell on the deaf ears of Duryodhana, as if he had totally lost his reason. Preparations for the war began and after a long time the day of the battle dawned. But at the moment the great battle was to begin, the foremost warrior, Arjuna, suddenly lost courage. His mind was full with a kind feeling for his opponents ! He was not ready to fight and this he told Krishna. Krishna spoke to Arjuna about truth, about life and death and several other things. This part of the *Mahabharata* is given in the *Bhagavadgita*. Finally the war began. It went on for eighteen days, each day witnessing the death of one or the other warrior. The coronation of Yudhishthira at Hastinapura took place. After a long span he, with his brothers, went to heaven. That is the end of this epic, the *Mahabharata*.

Like any other great work of its kind, the *Gita* can only be understood by studying it in totality. It not only talks of action or dutiful action, but also talks of that action which exceeds the social duties or ethical obligations. This great scripture describes ways of living an ego-free life.

It is written in plain terms and has the ability to solve the great social, ethical and spiritual problems which man faces. However, sometimes, it is interpreted as an allegory of the inner life, where the battles of the soul and the powers that strive within us contend for supremacy.

The *Gita* comprises eighteen chapters. The first chapter starts with the details of Arjuna's dejection at Kurukshetra. Arjuna asks the questions that are issue-based and portray his inner struggle. The questions raised by him are those that every man comes across. He presents the dilemma of man who has to take the world as it is, and act in it in a way to gain spiritual strength.

The second chapter explains Samkhya Yoga and Lord Krishna details the knowledge of the soul and its nature.

The way to achieve self-discipline and self-control has been described in this chapter. The Lord says that the sages renounce the fruit which action yields and liberate themselves from the bondage of birth to reach the status beyond misery.

In the Third Chapter which is named Karma Yoga, the teacher has given the Principle of Divine Works. He declares broadly the doctrine by saying:

"Do your action, self-controlled, for action is greater than inaction; even the maintenance of the physical life cannot be achieved without action."

He further puts stress on the work (karma) by saying that He himself follows in the path of action. He advocates that everyone should follow this path. He also describes the importance of nature (Prakrati) which determines the actions of men. He tells us that nature gives rise to desires which are the cause of action. And nature should be controlled by Prana, the vital being.

In the Fourth Chapter, Lord Krishna describes the yoga of knowledge (Jnanayoga). The means of knowledge to achieve the end of human life has been discussed. In the following 'shlokas', the purpose of 'Avatarhood' or incarnation has also been given:

"Whenever there is a fading of the Dharma and the uprising of unrighteousness, O Bharata (Arjuna), then I incarnate myself. For the deliverance of the good, for the destruction of the evil-doers, for the enthroning of the Righteousness, the Dharma, I am born from age to age."

The doctrine of 'nishkama karma' (disinterested action) has also been advocated which emphasises that one should act without a desire for the results.

The Fifth Chapter is about the Renunciation of Action. One of the shlokas says:

"He who can bear the velocity of wrath and desire, even here before he gives up his body, he is a yogin, a happy man."

It says that the non-attachment is essential. It is by this that one becomes free from the desires and passions. This brings freedom and true happiness.

The Sixth Chapter is on the Yoga of unitive contemplation (Dhyan Yoga). It answers some of the very fundamental questions;

"Works are to be done, but what should be the purpose?"

The answers: The works are the cause of self-perfection and liberation and it helps one to ascend the hill of Yoga.

The questions: "What if one has got to the top?"

The answer comes: Then the work becomes the cause of fixity in the self and the work is done in perfect equality.

The Seventh Chapter is on the Yoga or the unitive way of wisdom-synthesis (Jana-Vijnana Yoga).

After a synthesis of work and knowledge in the first six chapters, the seventh to the twelfth chapters set forth a metaphysical statement of the nature of the Divine Being and relate and synthesise knowledge and devotion.

In the Seventh Chapter, the activity and the Pravrithi have been shown as the subordinates of the Para Prakriti. And Para Prakriti is the Divine will itself. Here in a shloka, the Lord says:

"Whatever form of Me any devotee with faith desires to worship, I make that faith of his firm and undeviating."

The unification of devotion and knowledge is evident in this shloka.

The Eighth Chapter is on the Immutable Brahman. (Akshara Bramha Yoga). It describes Akshara (the Immutable) as the Supreme Brahman. The name given to this creative movement is Karma.

The Ninth Chapter is on the yoga of "King - Knowledge" "Raj — Vidya-Raja-Guhya-Yoga" and King - Secret. Here the Divine tells Arjuna about his all-pervasive nature. In a shloka he says:

"It is as the great, the all-pervading aerial principle dwells in the etheric one that all existences dwell in Me, that is how you have to conceive of it."

The Tenth Chapter is on the yoga of Vibhuti (Divine Manifestation) or the unitive recognition of positive values. Here the supreme godhead is visioned as the unchanging imperishable Self in man who originates and directs all his workings. The man should aspire to fill his consciousness with His, surrender his life upto Him to become even contented and joyful.

The Eleventh Chapter is entitled the Yoga of the Vision of the World-Spirit. (Visva roopa darshan) The Lord shows his virata-rupa to Arjuna. And the visualisation of the reality creates amazement, fear and love in Arjuna's heart. He breathes the eternal prayer of merging with the Self.

The Twelfth Chapter is entitled Bhakti Yoga (The yoga of devotion). In this chapter the Lord describes how to be near and dear to him, and thereby find the way to liberate oneself. He teaches equality, desirelessness and freedom from the egoistic nature. This equality comes from the love founded on knowledge, and this love is a vast absorbing and all-containing love for the divine self who is Creator and Master of the universe.

The Thirteenth Chapter is on "The Yoga of the Distinction between the Field and the Knower of the Field", i.e., understanding the distinction between the actual and perceptual aspects of the Absolute. Here the earlier thoughts and truths have been brought out in full detail. The truth, the object and the way the knower behaves have been provided in this Chapter. The last shloka, says:

"They who with the eye of knowledge perceive this difference between the Field and the Knower of the Field, and the liberation of beings from nature (Prakriti), they attain to the Supreme."

The Fourteenth Chapter on "The Yoga of the Division of the Three Gunas" (Guna traya Vibhas Yoga) talks of the highest of all knowledge. Here the Soul has been distinguished from Nature and it is said that the soul dwells in enjoying Gunas. It declares that the oneness with this Soul and Nature is the very essence of spiritual freedom.

The Fifteenth Chapter on "The Yoga of the Supreme Person" synthesises the truths of spiritual experience. It leads to the conclusion that the highest state of the soul is its dwelling in the Purushottama (The Supreme Person).

The Sixteenth Chapter is on "The Yoga of Division

Between the Divine and the Demonaical Endowments." Here the Lord describes the egoistic nature and how it expresses itself. He also tells how the pure and truthful should avoid using these expressions.

The Seventeenth Chapter entitled "The Yoga of the Threefold Division of Faith" depicts the gunas (Rajas, Tamas and Satva); The Faith and the Works. How the acts of man are governed by the three gunas and according to their faith they have been analysed.

The Eighteenth and the last chapter is entitled "The Yoga of the Renunciation and Liberation." It enters into a psychological analysis of the gunas, the Faiths and teaches about a divine transcendence. Here the principle of Sannyas (renouncing the world) and the principle of Tyaga and their differences have been set forth.

Buddha

In the sixth century B.C., Northern India was divided into many states. In one of the states known as the Sakya State, the birth of Siddhartha Gautama took place. His father Suddhodana was Aditya by his gotra. He had two wives, Mahamaya and Mahaprajapati. The child was born to Mahamaya in the year 563 B.C. on the Vaishakha Purnima day. Siddhartha's younger brother was Nanda, born to Mahaprajapati. Siddhartha also had several cousins, Mahanama, Anurudha, Devadatta, etc. He grew up in their company.

At the age of eight, Siddhartha started his education. Eight Brahmins who were very dear to his father, were his first teachers. Thereafter, Siddhartha was sent to Sabbamita for the knowledge of the Vedas, Vedangas and Upanishads. Under him Gautama Siddhartha mastered all the philosophies. He also learned the science of concentration and meditation in an ashrama at Kapilvastu.

Whenever Gautama went to his father's farm and found no work he settled at a quiet place, and practised meditation. He was of a kindly disposition. He did not like exploitation of man by man. He said to his friends: "Can it be right that one man should exploit another?" His friends did not know what to say. They believed in the old philosophy of life that the worker was born to serve and that in serving his master he was only fulfilling his destiny. Though a man of learning, Siddhartha always observed the custom and did engage himself in manual work. He refused to join hunting parties where he did not derive pleasure in killing innocent animals.

He tried to induce his companions to join him in practising meditation. But his friends did not take the matter seriously. They made a mockery of it. His childhood was marked by the presence of a sense of compassion. His spirit of compassion was so great that he preferred to save the life of an innocent bird shot with an arrow by his cousin.

In the sixteenth year of his life, Siddhartha Gautama was married to Yashodhara, the daughter of Dandapani. Dandapani was not very happy with his daughter's choice for he felt that Siddhartha was addicted to the company of saints and sages. After a long spell of married life, Yashodhara gave birth to a son, Rahula.

In order to make Gautama take an interest in household life, his father Suddhodana built three luxurious palaces for his son to live in, one each for three different seasons. He also consulted his family priest, Udayan, a man of sound policy and practice, and provided a harem for the prince with very beautiful inmates. Udayan advised the beautiful women of the harem to subdue Siddhartha's nature. On this, the women did all they could to win over the prince. But all their advances and subtle coquetry, could not make the prince rejoice. He remained steadfast and undisturbed in his mind. The months and years of this blandishment passed bearing no fruits. When Udayan realised the failure of the girls, he talked to the prince. After alluding to a number of precedents, he observed, "And yet thou, a young man, full of strength and beauty, despise enjoyments which rightly belong to thee..." On this, the prince replied," "I do not despise worldly objects. I know that all mankind is bound up therein. But remembering that the world is transitory, my mind cannot find pleasure in them."

Udayan was silenced by the firm and strong resolve of the prince and reported this to his father. The seraglio of women wearing their garlands and ornaments in vain, with their graceful arts and endearments, all proving futile, was disbanded.

At the age of twenty, according to the rules of the Sakya Sangh, Siddhartha Gautama was initiated and became a member thereof. He assured the Purohit that he would do his best to follow the Sangh's rules of discipline in letter and in spirit. After a long passage of time of eight years, a tragedy for the royal family occurred and so the crisis in the life of Siddhartha. There was a decision to be taken regarding a battle between the two kingdoms, the Sakya and the Koliya.

But Siddhartha declined to abide by this. He had, according to the Sangh discipline, three alternatives to consider:

To join the forces and participate in the war;

To consent to being hanged or exiled; or to allow the members of his family to be condemned to a social boycott and confiscation of property.

He willingly accepted the second alternative and asked for a sentence of death or exile. He was ordered to be exiled. This news reached the palace before Siddhartha, and he found his parents weeping, and plunged in great grief. His wife promised him that she would look ofter his parents and his son. He, then left. He was only twenty-nine when he underwent renunciation (privraja). The people of the State admired him and sighed for him saying:

"His was an act of supreme sacrifice. His is a brave and courageous act deserved to be called a Sakya Muni."

Leaving Kapilavastu, Siddhartha Gautama, thought of going to Rajagraha, the capital of Magadha. The long journey of nearly 400 miles was covered by him all on foot. From there he went to Rajagraha. In Rajagraha he met five other Parivrajakas who also put up a tent by the side of the hut which Gautama had erected for himself. They too were struck by Gautama's appearance and wondered what could have led him to take Parivraja. On his explaining the circumstances which led him to take Parivraja, they said, "We have heard of it." Then they told him about the settlement of the dispute between the two states, and the end of war. Hearing this news of peace, however, Siddhartha decided to continue to be a Parivrajaka.

He asked himself, "What have I left my people for? Does my problem end because war has ended?" And on deep reflection, he concluded it had not. Could he accept any of the social philosophies? He resolved to examine everything for himself.

With his desire to pursue other ways, Gautama left Rajagraha to meet Arada Kalam. Approaching Arada Kalam, he expressed his desire to be initiated into his doctrine and discipline. Thereon, Arada Kalam said, "Verily thou art a worthy vessel to receive this highest training."

The prince, having heard his words, was filled with great pleasure. Then Gautama was told the tenets of the Sankhya system. After this, he went to Magadha. He learned the Dhyana and Samadhi Marga. Though difficult, Gautama mastered it. He practised all the austerities and mortifications of the severest sort. They lasted for a long period of six years. Yet he had seen no new light and was no nearer the solution to the problem of misery in the world on which his mind was centred. The end of the trial of asceticism ended by the acceptance of the food offered by Sujata on the bank of Uruvela. The five accompanying ascetics who were with Gautama left him in disgust, for having given up the life of austerity and self-mortification.

With this refreshment of food, Gautama settled down to dwell over his past experiences. He realised that all paths had failed. He was very sorry for his failures. But the frustration as such did not touch him. He was hopeful of finding a way. He left Uruvela with hope and determination and went along the wide road to Gaya. He sat down cross legged and upright below the Banyan Tree. He said to himself, "Skin, sinew and bone may dry up as they will, my flesh and blood may dry in my body, but without attaining complete enlightenment I will not leave this seat." Evil passions entered Gautama's mind but left in disgust. To feed himself during the period of meditation, Gautama had collected enough food to last him for forty days. He reached final enlightenment in four stages:-

(a) In the first stage he called forth reason and investigation.

(b) Then in the second stage he added concentration.

(c) In the third stage he brought to his aid equanimity and mindfulness.

(d) In the fourth stage he added purity to equanimity and equanimity with mindfulness.

In the end, after meditation for four weeks, light arose, ignorance was dispelled and knowledge arose. He saw a new way. He realised that there was suffering in the world and there should be a way to remove this suffering and make mankind happy. The questions he asked himself were:

"What are the causes of suffering and unhappiness which an individual undergoes?"

"How to remove unhappiness?"

To these questions he got a right answer which is called 'Somma Bodhi' (Right Enlightenment). This is why the Banyan Tree has come to be known as the Bodhi Tree.

The things which Buddha, the Enlightened One, accepted are:-

(a) The mind is the centre of everything.

(b) Mind precedes matter.

(c) Mind is the forerunner and chief of all its faculties.

(d) Mind is the fount of all the good and evil.

He taught that real religion lies not in the books of religion but in the practice of the tenets of the religion.

There are beings without limit, we all should take the vow to convey these tenets to them.

Rama

Rama is one of the most popular avataras of Vishnu. The story of Rama had been in existence, since time immemorial. The two well-known written works on Rama and his life are:

Ramayana by Valmiki and *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas.

Valmiki portrayed Rama as a great and unique man. Tulsidas and other poets portrayed him as an avatar of Vishnu. The tale of the lord and His consort born as mortals, experiencing human sorrow and establishing dharma on earth, was sung by Rishi Valmiki in words of matchless beauty.

The great kingdom of Kasala, situated on the bank of Sarayu was ruled by King Dasharatha. King Dasharatha was the equal of Indra and Kubera. He had three wives, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. In course of time, Dasharatha's sons were born: Rama to Kausalya and Bharata to Kaikeyi, Lakshmana and Shatrughna, the twins, were born to Sumitra.

The four sons of Dasharatha were given all the training prescribed for princes. One day, the great sage Viswamitra arrived to see the King Dasharatha. King Dasharatha received Viswamitra and offered him a seat. Viswamitra said: "I am engaged in performing a sacrifice. As it nears completion, two powerful Rakhsasas, Maricha and Subrahu, defile it. To defeat these Rakhsasas, entrust Rama to my care only for a few days. Do not refuse my request." Listening to the views of the wise sage, Dasharatha made up his mind to send Rama and Lakshmana. The sage initiated the princes in secret mantras, which had the virtue of protecting them from fatigue and harm, in the way. At the place of sacrifice, Rama killed Subahu with Agnayastra and also Maricha. The entire army of Rakshasas was utterly destroyed, thereafter by the two princes.

The great sage was not ignorant of the purpose of Rama's birth. He also knew the powers of the weapons he had given to Rama. But visualisation of the things was something more than the expectation. Then he thought about the service he had yet to do for Rama — the princes's marriage with Sita. It was decided, and Rama and Lakshmana went with Viswamitra to Janaka's city — Ayodhya. All were duly welcomed. Showing the ideal behaviour, Rama obtained Viswamitra's permission and the King stepped out to the iron bow-case. He lifted the bow and bent and strung it and drew the string back with such a force that the mighty bow snapped with a crash like a clap of thunder. Then, according to the conditions of Swayamvara, Sita was wedded to Rama at the appointed day and hour. Thus the Eternal Lovers were re-united and rejoiced like lovers come together after separation.

Rama returned to Ayodhya. The days passed happily. One day, the kind Dasharatha told him about his wish to enthrone Rama as the King of Ayodhya. According to the practice in royalty, the preparations had to be made. But Dasharatha's long cherished dream was not to be fulfilled. Manthara, Queen Kaikeyi's woman companion and confidential servant, was to play her role. She told Kaikeyi, "Once Rama is crowned, he will not leave Bharata alone. To save Bharata's life and prosperity you should stop this coronation ceremony." Kaikeyi, who had looked upon Rama as her own son, was enmeshed in Manthara's arguments and became helpless. Something clicked in her mind and she approached the King to remind him about the pledge given in a battlefield. When Dasharatha listened to boons of Kaikeyi, he was thunderstruck. The first boon she had asked for concerned Bharata's coronation and the other was about sending Rama to live in the forest for fourteen years. The mighty but helpless King was in extreme agony. He was in a dilemma of natural affection on one side and the moral obligation to fulfil a pledge on the other. But when Rama came to know this he had no regrets and decided to go to the forest at once.

Here all noble impluses of our daily lives can be seen in Dasharatha's anguish, Rama's cheerful renunciation and Kaikeyi's greedy passion.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana left Ayodhya while all the inhabitants were crying and weeping. But what was to be, was to be. They reached a place beside the lovely Chitrakoota hill, where the workmanship of Lakshmana showed itself and the result was a strong mud hut with windows and doors all made of bamboos and jungle material. Beside the lovely Chitrakoota hill, in a cottage the three young people lived, free from care, performing their daily devotional routine. Later, this happy life in Chitrakoota was followed by sufferings and sorrows for the three.

The circumstances had driven Dasharatha to an action which not only broke his heart but made him hate himself and deprived him even of self-pity. He remembered something that had happened long ago and it aggravated the anguish of his heart. He recalled the death of a man who was taking water in his pitcher from the river Sarayu. The sound of water made the king think of it as an elephant drinking water. He aimed his bow at the unseen target using his skill to hit the target aiming by sound only. The blind parents of the man were waiting for the son to come. The King reached there and was told about the sin done in ignorance. But the grief they had suffered made him curse the King by saying, "You will die of grief when your son leaves you." Detailing this story to his wife Kaushalya, the King breathed his last. The news spread and the palace was filled with grief. Everyone cried like orphaned children, embracing one another in unavailing lamentation. The obsequies of the dead King were duly performed. After some time, the Kulaguru Vashishtha and the ministers advised Bharata to take over (the rule of) the kingdom. But, Bharata declined humbly by saying: "It is not proper to accept this kingdom. It belongs to the eldest son." Then he went to the forest to request Rama to return to Ayodhya. He met Rama in Chitrakoota. Valmiki had provided a long lecture on the art of government, in the form of conversation between the two brothers. Tulsidas has narrated this meeting of Rama and Bharata to show the devotional (bhakti) way. And finally Rama told Bharata that he could not disobey his father's word. All the materialistic and pragmatic advice was rejected by Rama. He did not swerve from truth and rectitude. Then Bharata gave up his efforts and announced the installing of Rama's sandals on the throne. He said: "I will derive my authority from them and I shall do my work as king."

Ten years in the forest elapsed. Many Rakshasas were killed by the two princes in order to establish dharma.

Shoorpanakha, who was evil in the form of a woman, came to offer her love and was insulted and injured. But fate had something else to offer. Shoorpanakha, in order to use Ravana (the demon king of Lanka), described Sita's beauty in glowing terms to him and kindled his lawless passion. This roused Ravana's lust and made him desire Sita. It caught him in the snare.

Ravana conspired with Maricha and Maricha transformed himself into a wonderful deer. It was like a living stream of jewels with various colours on its skin. It wandered around Rama's ashrama. Sita saw it and requested Rama to catch it for her. But Lakshmana was suspicious of it. However, Sita's pleas made Rama ready to go for its hunt. Maricha cried in the voice of Rama saying, "Ah Sita! Ah Lakshmana!" Overwhelmed by fear, Sita appealed to Lakshmana repeatedly in an agony of anxiety. When Lakshmana remembered his brother's command, he decided not to move, Sita grew furious and Lakshmana became the traitor and imposter for her. The cruel words of Sita pierced Lakshmana's heart like poisoned arrows. He tried to pacify Sita. The way of destiny is cruel.

Unwilling though he was, Lakshmana had to go. The evil was there in the form of Ravana. He came in an asectic's form and lifted Sita up and carried her away from the ashrama. The wailing Sita cried out of helplessness. Jatayu the bird, saw the chariot flying over the tree he was sleeping on. He cared not for Ravana and his might; he only saw a princess in distress; he thought of his friend Dasaratha and his promise to Rama and was resolved that this outrage should not occur while he lived to prevent it. He fought with all his strength and got desperately wounded. At last Ravana cut off the bird's wings with his sword and the old bird fell on the ground unable to move.

Sita spoke words of contempt, and warned Ravana. But he flew like an arrow across the sky towards Lanka. She took off her sash and tying up her jewels in it threw the bundle down hoping that the ornaments thus dropped would be seen by Rama and give him a clue of the direction in which she was carried away.

Reaching the ashrama, the two princes found it empty as they had feared. Sita was not there. The deer skin, the kusha grass, the mat spread as a seat, all lay scattered on the ground. Rama wept and ran hither and thither in the grove and round the cottage. After wandering and weeping in vain for a long time he fell on the ground, moaning, "Ha

Lakshmana! Ha Sita! He cried like an elephant trapped in a pit.

The two brothers travelled to every mountain, forest and river-bank calling Sita's name aloud. They arrived near the Godavari. The baffled and grief-stricken Rama cried out against the gods, and against the five elements. Lakshmana did his best to calm the distracted Rama. He sought to give courage and consolation to his elder brother.

Rama and Lakshmana now set forward in the direction of the river Pampa. They visited the ashrama of the aged sanyasin, S'abri, the disciple of Rishi Matanga, and accepted her hospitality. She produced the fruits she had gathered and kept for them. But the beautiful sight of the region made Rama think of Sita, "How much would Sita have enjoyed this!" Lakshmana, like Adishesha, tried to give Rama fresh energy and enthusiasm. Adishesha, the serpent, is said to be ever protecting the spirit of Visnu.

Rama met Sugreeva and Hanuman here and the spontaneous mutual attraction of hearts resulted in friendship. The pre-destined Hamuman's sublime devotion was to serve the purpose of the incarnation and thus, there was acceptance at first sight. Sugreeva showed the jewels he had found. They were Sita's. After Sugreeva's words of enquiry about the place where Sita was hidden by Ravana, Rama wiped the tears from his eyes and embraced Sugreeva. He got over the weakness and recovered his fortitude and self-control. Rama promised to help Sugreeva who was living a fugitive's life because of his brother Vali. Vali was killed and the kingdom was restored to Sugreeva.

Hanuman went in search towards Lanka and saw Sita in the Ashoka Grove. There he saw Sita who was very depressed because of her captivity for a long period. He comforted Sita. She was consoled but also pained by the thought that Rama had not forgotten her, but was thinking of her, grieving and searching for her.

After leaving Sita, Hamuman decided to instil some fear into Ravana to prevent him from troubling Sita in the meantime. He assumed a huge form and began to lay waste the grove. His roar filled the city of Lanka and raised echoes from all the eight quarters. He thus created fear among all the Rakshasas and set fire to the city. Again after consoling Sita, he returned to his place— Mahendra hill, where the Vanara kings and captains like Angada, Jambavanta, etc. were waiting for him.

Anxiety enveloped Ravana's palace and all the people in the city. In the assembly, Vibhishana, Ravana's younger brother, advised Ravana to return Sita to Rama honourably and seek his forgiveness. This enraged Ravana and he insulted his brother. Unable to bear the insult, Vibhishana rose and declared that he was renouncing all his possessions. He then proceeded straight to the spot where Rama and Lakshmana had encamped. Here, first the Vanaras were doubtful about him but Rama maintained that Vibhishana had come to him for protection and it was his dharma to protect him. The acceptance of Vibhishana by the Lord illustrates his essential characterstics. He accepts all who in absolute surrender seek shelter at his feet, regardless of their merits or defects. Their sins are burnt out. This divine assurance is the life and light that a world filled with sin and darkness needs.

Ravana sent a scout to wean Sugreeva away from his devotion to Rama. But Sugreeva did not listen to his advice of leaving Rama and returning to Kishkindha, Sugreeva's kindgom. The preparations for the battle began. The Vanara army descended from Mount Suvela and entered the forest adjoining the city of Lanka. In the great battle which ensued, blood flowed in streams. There was a fight between Lakshmana and Ravana. Lakshmana fell down unconscious. But Hanuman intervened and carried him to Rama. He became conscious again by the Sanjivini which was a herb, brought by Hanuman.

Rama used the Brahmastra to kill the ten-headed demon Ravana. The Astra, emitting flames, went towards Ravana and pierced his chest, where was enshrined the secret of his invincibility, and shattered it. Then the Raksha fell from the chariot and lay stretched in the battlefield. The lord of Lanka was no more.

Vibhishana was crowned King of Lanka. Sita was brought to Rama where he spoke some bitter words to her. Sita was asked to prove her purity, A fire was kindled and Sita went into it. The god of fire, Agni, rose in his own body, lifting Sita in his arms with all her clothes and jewels untouched and intact and presented her to Rama. Rama and Sita then reunited and travelled back to Ayodhya. Rama was crowned as the King.

The story of Rama is full of valour and it displays dharma, how important and meaningful it is. Rama, as an avatar inducted the importance of dharma in society.

CHAPTER 8

THE ISMS

One of the most striking and unique features of Hinduism is that it does not interfere with men of other religions. Hindus worship many gods, yet they never claim ignorance about the godhead of others. A Hindu first makes an offering to his chosen deity, and only then makes offerings to other deities. Thus he recognises their existence and authority, too. As a result of this ambience, people worshipping certain deities and following certain customs get grouped together.

As a result, we can say why we have various sects or 'isms' in Hinduism. The most prevalent of these 'isms' are discussed here.

Vaishnavism

In this sect, Vishnu is regarded as the supreme God. The believers of this sect are called Vaishnavas. The Vaishnavas usually wear a white chandan, (sandal-paste) called gopi-chandan. The gopi-chandan is the chandan brought from Dwarka. But, it may often be substituted by a common clay.

The most important duty of a Vaishnava is 'Gurupaadaasaya', or taking spiritual tutelage under a guru. The guru gives a mantra, or text to the disciple. The mantra is considered very important and manifest in the guru, and the guru is Hari (God) Himself. Then comes 'naama kirtana' (repetition of his name). This is a very important duty of a Vaishnava. A common way is the chanting of "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krisna Krisna

Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare." The third duty of a Vaishnav is Sankirtana (singing the praise of God, together). The singing is also accompanied with body movements and dancing. On the death of any great personage among the Vaishnavas (a gosain or mahant), a feast is arranged which is called Mahotsava (an occasion of great joy). This is considered as one of the most important duties of a Vaishnav. The presiding gosain takes a little food from a dish, which is mixed with the other food, and the whole is thus called prasad (sacred food). All who come, take this most valued food. Vaishnavas also listen to the Bhagavata read by the 'kathaks' (the readers). Vaishnavism does not believe in the caste system. The ascetics or Vairagis eat together, sing and dance together irrespective of the caste, etc.

Vaishnavism has its main teaching in the following words:

"Find your guru, speak the truth, and follow the counsels of your guru." It stresses mainly on guru and is considered as the personification of the chosen deity of his followers. The Radha Vallabhis worship Krisna, preferring their adoration to Radha. They even adopt women's dress and manners to show their great regard for Radha. Some Nagas are also included in this sect. They are the men who discard all clothing. The Vairagis are the ascetics of wandering nature. They wander from shrine to shrine and depend upon the gifts of the faithful.

SHAIVISM

Shiva is the embodiment of that which is stern, cruel and powerful. There are only a few sub divisions among Shaivas, and this is one of the reasons why the temples of Shiva are most commonly found.

The Dandis : They are the representatives of the fourth Ashrama (i.e., Sanyasa Ashrama). They carry a dand (a staff), wearing only a small cloth round the waist. The dandis live alone. They do not have a particular time for, or form of worship. The mere existence, and not life is regarded as the perfect state of being. Their main work, therefore, is meditation.

The Dasnami Dandis: The ten chief disciples of Sankara are regarded as the descendants of the fraternities founded by him. They differ from Dandis in their attitude to entrants; the Dasnamis admit Brahmans only to their fellowship.

They wear clothes and ornaments, prepare their own food, and only a Brahman is admitted to their order.

The Yogis: The yogis regard meditation as their main duty. They practise concentration of mind (dharma) in order to reach the stage of meditation (dhyana). The Hindu Scriptures also believe that Yogis are lighter than the lightest, and heavier than the heaviest.

Jangamas: The members of this order wear a representation of the linga on their bodies or in their dress. They are often accompanied by Shiva's favourite animal, Nandi (bull).

Paramhansas: This is the most eminent sect of the Shaivaites. They are indifferent to pleasure or pain, insensitive to heat or cold, and averse to satiety or want.

Their sole occupation is meditation. They neither want, nor demand things. Their sustenance depends upon those who accompany them.

Aghoris: The Aghoris differ from Paramhansas only in the sense that they suppose sanctity to be a reason for liberal almsgiving. They usually carry a human skull and bones with them.

Some other classes of Shaivaites include Urddhabahus (holders up of arms) who stand in one posture for years. The Akashmukhis are those who turn their faces towards the sky until the muscles of their necks become fixed. Some of the Nagas also follow this path.

Shaktism

Shaktism or Shakta doctrine is a form of Vedanta which may be called Shakti-vada or Shakti Vedanta. It teaches its doctrine from the practical standpoint. It lays stress on the concept of Power. Even in the dissolution of the world Being is Power, though power of Shakti is then consciousness as such (Chidrupini). This Power is both the Power to be as well as the Power to become. Power to be is the static aspect of Shiva-Shakti, while the Power to become is the changeful aspect of Shiva-Shakti.

The world is produced by the Power of the Lord-Ishwara. Shaktism adopts the view that the Absolute is relationless Being as well as Manifestation as an infinity of relations. This is the true and complete Logical-Whole. The Absolute exceeds all relation and thought, cause and effect. But as it does involve some relation and thought, there is reason to believe it to be the first cause and therefore a real creation, and so forth. Here, the Supreme Reality is thought to be beyond duality and non-duality. Maya is the Divine Mother Power or Mahamaya. The two aspects of Reality as Brahman and Isvara are accepted. Shiva-Shakti are both the Experience, Whole and Part, which exists as the universe. So in the rituals of worshipping, the worshipper conceives himself to be Shiva Shakti as the Divine Mother.

Shakti is in Herself pure blissful consciousness (Chidrupini). She is the Mother of Nature and Nature itself is born of the creative play of Her thought. The believers of Shaktism are called Shaktas. There are two main divisions among Shaktas:-

(1) The Dakshinas, and (2) The Vaamaachaaris.

The Dakshinas are those who worship in an open, public manner. They adopt the Puranic ritual and also believe in offering animal sacrifices in order to please the Goddess. The Vaamaachaaris worship the Goddess according to the instructions of the Tantras. Their aim is to be indifferent to hatred, filthiness, and negativity. For this, they visit a cemetery or burning, they visit a cemetery or burning ghat alone at midnight. They consume wine and meat. They do such things to remove fear, hatred, etc. from their minds. Their principal ceremonies are performed in solitude, as well as in the presence of the members of the sect together.

The rites and rituals of this ism or sect are found in "Kularnava Tantra." Tantra, is the name given to certain occult teachings and practices which are very contradictory from the point of their origin. It has some overlapping practices with some forms of Yoga. With the help of Tantra, the development of psychic powers is sought by special yogic practices, depending upon physiological identifications. The tantric ideals are represented in the sculptors of some Hindu temples. The Vamacharis (left-handed) try to proceed to master the five Makaras (five M's) with the help of Tantra. They are:

Madya (alcoholic beverages);
Maamsa (meat);
Matsya (fish);
Mudra (symbolic gestures);
Maithuna (sexual intercourse).

The Tantric rituals are very secret and there is more rumour than actuality about their practice.

TANTRA

The Tantric yoga is the theoretical as well as practical application of the doctrine of basic correspondence between man and cosmos. The creation has been thought of consisting of different parts. These parts, in spite of their respective differences, reproduce the essential basic structure of the entire creation. The parts have been named as 7 "Lokas" (worlds). The names for the "Lokas" in relation to the human body are "Chakras" (wheels). The Chakras are:-

Muladhara Chakra
Svadhishthana Chakra
Manipur Chakra

Anahata Chakra
Vishuddhi Chakra
Ajne Chakra
Sahsrar Chakra

The Chakras are represented by "lotus-flowers."

(a) The Muladhara Chakra.

It is the first wheel from below. It is situated between the genitals and the anus. It is the region of the element prithvi (earth).

(b) The Svadhishthana Chakra

This is situated a little above the genitals. This is the second wheel and it is the place of the water-element (water).

(c) The Manipur Chakra

This is the third wheel, situated in the region of the navel. It represents the fire-element (Agni).

(d) The Anahata Chakra

The fourth wheel is found at the level of the heart. It is the region of wind (Vayu).

(e) The Visuddhi Chakra

The fifth Chakra, which is situated in the throat, is the bearer of the element space (akasa).

(f) The Ajnachakra

This is found in the middle of the eyebrows. There is an absence of elements here. It is the place of the inner organ of action, Ahmkara (ego).

(g) The Sahsrar Chakra

This Chakra is the higest centre and is thought to be situated at the topmost point of the head. It is the divine region.

The first four Chakras symbolise the four nethermost regions and so they represent the elements of the lower self of the individuals. The two Chakras mentioned above are the symbolisation of the higher self and the seventh and the last Chakra is the symbol of the Supreme Self or the Divine.

According to the Tantra-teaching, Shakti is considered as the creative force of God. By the gradual processes of Chakra Bhedana (piercing of the wheels), the aspirant (Sadhaka) is able to see the Divine Light. Through this Light he dispels his ignorance and attains realisation (siddhi). He is then able to bear the ensuing tremendous widening of Consciousness.

There are other classes of scriptures followed by Tantriks. They are Nigamas, Agamas, Yamalas, Damaras, Uddisas, Kaksaputas and so forth and are less popular.

CHAPTER 9

REINCARNATION

It has been believed since very early times that good men ascended to heaven to the companionship of gods, and they lead a painless life there. This life remained free from all earthly imperfections. This was a happy life. The Satapatha Brahmana mentions that every individual enters again, after death, upon a new existence. In this existence he gathers the fruit of merit acquired earlier and also endures the consequences of sins previously committed. There are other streams of thought, which support this doctrine of transmigration. After wandering perpetually through the bodies of plants, animals and men, and after being compelled in each existence to experience pain and joy, and perpetually renew the pangs of death, man attains the freedom from the cycles of birth and death. Even the gods, are involved in this cycle of existence which is called samsara. The wheel of existence rolls on without rest or intermission. And when one form of life comes to an end, there remains a remnant of merit and guilt still unrewarded and unpunished, from which the germ of new existence is derived. The Satapatha Brahmana says that the powers of death which pursue men from one existence to another may be appeased by sacrificial offerings, and that by such offerings release may be obtained from the return of death.

The supreme spiritual endeavour which Hinduism aims at is this release. This can be attained by the way of knowledge. The true 'knowledge' removes ignorance which veils the natural man and inclines him to accept false ideas and thus get perverted. Also with the disappearance of ignorance, the desires of man disappear. It is the desire which binds man to existence, and involve him in actions. The saving knowledge has the power to consume the seed of works, and so make it impossible for all future line a continuance of migration. The Upanishads clearly declare that saving knowledge consists in the recognition of the sole existence of the Brahman, the soul of the universe, and bestows discrimination about the illusory nature of the phenomenal world, and especially the identity of the individual soul, the atman, with the Brahman.

Brahman; Atman; Maya

Brahman

According to Sankara, Brahman has two forms (rupa): nirguna (the unqualified) and saguna (the opposite form). Nirguna is free from every limiting qualification, while saguna is Isvara, who is qualified by limiting conditions.

In any definition of Brahman, the first thing that must be said is that Brahman is One, without a second. No adjective, no noun, no mark or qualification exists which can be predicated to Brahman. Nothing which is ascribable can give substance to it. Thus we find that it is formless, nameless, wordless and negates all the possible attributes. It is totality as such. It is infinite. It is the subtlest of all the substances. It is the purest of the beings. It is beyond speech and thought and indefinable in itself. Only silence (mauna) can describe it, for it surpasses everything. The Brahman is the ultimate. No mind on this planet can find words or even apprehensions to describe it accurately. Therefore the sages repeatedly say that on the level of knowledge (vidya), Brahman is solitude (vijana).

But on the lower level of knowledge, which is tainted by avidya, Brahman can be understood. The seeker realising, at the very moment of his learning, his ignorance, can conclude that the supreme is absolutely none-existent (Shurya). Another seeker, with the logical connection of words, also comes to realise the import of the sentences, i.e., "Aham Brahmasmi" (I am Brahman), These are the two paths Sankara prescribes for the seeker.

The qualified Brahman (saguna) is the lower Brahman as mentioned in the texts, and the Brahman on account of dualistic differentiation (avidya), becomes the object of devotion for the devotee (jivatman), who does not yet know the unqualified Brahman. The Brahman in this case is the Lord, the creator of Ishvara. The Lord is the causal agent of all actions, and also the superintendent of actions whether good or bad. The same Lord who causes the self to act, arranges favourable and unfavourable conditions in which to act. Only through His grace can we obtain liberation. Conclusively, we can say that the fruits of actions (Karma Falam) and grace (Kripa) are the two qualifications of the lower Brahman, Ishvara. The Brahman who is unqualified, cannot become the object of one's energies.

Atman

In "Upadeshasaahari" (Thousand Teachings), Sankara says: "The supreme reason (why I am unattached) is that nothing really exists except the atman." Atman, as he meant here, can only be the paramatman, that which really exists. The ultimate reality can be attained only by a discrimination between the jivatman and the paramatman. Paramatman is pure consciousness (caitanya), holy (punya), eternal (nitya), absolute existence (sat), light (prakasa), the supreme bliss (parananda), purusa, immutable (nirvrikara), knowledge (cit, jnana), one without a second (advaya), Eternal Being, that which never changes, infinite, supreme, indivisible, intelligence, the real I, the inner Being, the uttermost and everlasting joy."

Even after attempting to describe the atman in such a manner, Sankara realises that positive content distorts the paramatman, and he admits that no words can adequately describe the paramatman. However, it can be described because the content of the words may create an appearance. To help understand it, Sankara gives the illustration of the reflection of a man's face as it is seen in the mirror. The image in the mirror cannot be as real as the face is, because when the face is removed, the image also disappears. Again, it cannot be unreal, because it is the image which appears in the mirror, when the face is in front of it. The similar is the appearance of the paramatman, which can be described indirectly, and not directly. This is beyond all attributes. It can be directly realised as pure consciousness and infinite bliss. Its appearance as an individual soul (jivatman) is caused by the deluded understanding and has no reality as such.

The appearance of paramatman is in the form of jivatman. On this point, Sankara uses maya as a principle to interpret. He says that paramatman is concealed in the jivatman, that is, the jivatman is connected with a form (body) and mind and the sense-organs. Thus it is limited, and this limitedness results in limited perception and conception. The seeker has to rise above it, then only can he be known as the paramatman.

Maya

Maya has been thought of as creative power, inexplicable mystery, indescribable mystery, power of saguna Brahman, and so on. Maya as the creative power of the Lord, brings forth the whole objective universe and all that is contained in it. It is the primal cause of the universe. The universe, then is merely the effect of this cause.

Though beyond description, Maya can be said to be composed of the three gunas, and from the effects which it produces, one can deduce its nature. The three gunas are rajas, tamas and sattva. The power of projection (vikshepa-shakti) is possessed in the rajas, while tamas has the power to veil the real nature of something, and make it appear as something else. The atman is revealed by sattva (purity). Maya must not be conceived as an independent principle in competition with the non-dual Brahman. Sankara says that the qualified Brahman is the ruler of maya, for maya arises out of saguna Brahman. The deluded contradiction between ishvara and unqualified Brahman is not real, and can never be. For those who comprehend Brahman as it really is, all attributions are eliminated by the sublation of all the effects of maya (i.e., dvaita) to the one Brahman who alone remains (i.e., advaita). Maya, Sankara says, is neither real nor unreal; nor can it be a mixture of the two. Further he says that since it is sublated to the supreme (para) Brahman, it cannot be ultimately real. It is also not unreal because that would imply the denial of the existence of the universe. The only answer to the query as per maya, available is that maya is an inexplicable mystery (anirvacaniya). It should be viewed with the existence of the empirical world (jagat).

CHAPTER 10

THE SIX SYSTEMS

The understanding of Hinduism is incomplete without taking into account the basis of Hindu philosophy. The philosophy of Hinduism is based on the six Darshanas or schools of philosophy. These Darshanas grew out of the Vedas and the Upanishads and were delivered by the great sages. They are:

1. The Nyaya, by Gautama;
2. The Vaishesika, by Kanada;
3. The Sankhya, by Kapila;
4. The Yoga, by Patanjali;

5. The Mimansa, by Jaimini; and
6. The Vedanta, by Badarayana or Vyasa.

The Nyaya System

This is a realistic philosophy founded by the great sage Gautama. According to this system, there are four separate sources of true knowledge. They are pratyaksha (perception), anumana (inference), upamana (comparison) and sabda (testimony). Direct knowledge of objects by our senses is perception. Perception may be bahya (external) or antara (internal) according to the sense concerned. Knowledge of objects through the apprehension of some mark (linga) which is related to the inferred objects (sadhya) is inference. There exists an invariable relation between the two, which is called vyaapti. The three terms used in inference are the paksa or minor term, about which we infer something; the sadhya or major term, which is the inferred object; and the linga or sadhana or middle term, which is related to the major and is present in the minor. The knowledge which is derived from comparison is called upamana. The knowledge derived from the statements of authoritative persons is sabda or verbal testimony.

According to the Nyaya, the objects of knowledge are the self, the body, the senses and their objects, cognition (buddhi), mind (manas), activity (pravrthi), mental defects (dosa), rebirth (pretyabhava), the feelings of pleasure and pain (phala), suffering (duhkha), and freedom from suffering (apavarga). The object of Nyaya is to deliver the self from its bondage to the body, the senses and their objects. The self, according to the Naiyayikas, is distinct from the body and the mind. When related to any object through the senses, it acquires the attribute of consciousness. However, consciousness is not an essential quality of the self. The self is all pervading (vibhu), indestructible and eternal. The absolute cessation of all pain and suffering brought about by the right knowledge of reality (tattwa-jnaana) is called liberation (apvarga). 'Apvarga' is liberation of the self absolutely from all pain. The term appears as a goal set down in the very first Ṣutra of Nyaya philosophy.

According to the Nyaya, God is the ultimate cause of the creation, maintenance and destruction of the world. The purpose of the creation of the world is that individual souls (jivas) might enjoy pleasure or suffer pain according to the merit or demerit of their actions in other lives and in other worlds. But under the loving care and wise guidance of the

Divine Being, all individuals can sooner or later attain right knowledge about themselves and the world, and thereby finally, obtain a release from all suffering and achieve mukti.

The Vaishesika System

This system was founded by the sage Kanada. This is closely related to the Nyaya system. It has the same end in view, i.e. the liberation of the individual self. All objects of knowledge are divided under the seven categories: substance (dravya), quality (guna), action (karma), generality (saamaanya), particularity (vishesa), the relation of inherence (samavaya), and non-existence (abhava).

Substance, the substratum of qualities and activities, has nine kinds, viz. earth, water fire, air, ether (akasha), time, space, soul and mind (manas). The first five are called the physical elements (bhutas) and they have the specific qualities of smell, taste, colour, touch and sound. The other four are composed of the four kinds of atoms. Atoms are invisible and indestructible particles of matter. The three substances, namely akasha, space and time, are eternal and all-pervading. The last substance, mind (manas) is also an eternal substance but it is not all-pervading. It is infinitely small like an atom and is the internal sense which is directly or indirectly concerned in all psychic functions like cognition, feeling and willing. The soul is considered an eternal and all-pervading substance which is the substratum of consciousness. The supreme soul is God, who creates the world out of eternal atoms. He is the ultimate source of the movements of atoms. The atomic theory of the Vaishesikas says that the atoms are made to compose a world that befits the unseen moral deserts (adrsta) of individual souls and serves the purpose of moral dispensation.

Quality is that which exists in a substance and has itself no activity or quality. A quality cannot exist unless it be in some substance. There are twenty-four kinds of qualities. Action, like quality belongs to substances and cannot exist by itself. Action is a movement. The five kinds of action are: throwing upward (uksepana), throwing downward (avakshepana), contraction (akuncan), expansion (prasaarana) and going (gamana). The common nature of things on the basis of which they can be grouped into one class and excluded from other classes, is the generality. Particularity (vishesa) is that ground on which the difference between the things is made. 'It stands for peculiarity or individuality of the eternal entities of the world. On the basis of the special treatment of this category of vishesa, the name Vaishesika has been given to this system. The permanent or eternal relation by which a whole is in its parts, is inference. Non-existence (abhava) stands for all negative facts.

The Vaishesika theory is the same as that of the Nyaya, with regard to God and liberation of the individual soul.

The Sankhya System

This is a philosophy of dualistic realism. The growth of this system is attributed to the sage Kapila. According to it, there are two ultimate realities, purusa and prakrti. They are independent of each other in respect of their existence. The purusa, an intelligence-principle has consciousness (chaitanya) as its essence. It is quite distinct from the body, the senses and the mind (manas).

It is the eternal consciousness which witnesses the changes and activities of the world, but it does not act and change itself in any way.

Prakrti, the ultimate cause of the world, is an eternal unconscious principle (idea) which is always changing. It has no other end than the satisfaction of the selves. The three constituents of prakrti are sattva, rajas and tamas which are called gunas. Here it is said that the cause and the effect are essentially identical, the effect being the manifested condition of the cause.

The theory of the evolution of the world is that at the starting point there is the association (samyoga) of the purusa with prakrti. From prakrti arises the great germ (mahat) of this vast universe. On this, the consciousness of the self is reflected and makes it conscious. It represents the awakening of nature from her cosmic slumber and the first appearance of thought. It is also called the intellect (buddhi). By a further transformation of the intellect, the second product, ahankara arises. This creates the feeling of 'I' and 'mine' (abhimana). With an excess of the element of sattva, five organs of knowledge (jnanandriya) arise from ahankar. Also, the five organs of action (karmendriya) and the mind arise from it. The increase of tamas in ahankara produces the five subtle elements (tanmatra). The seven principles of mahat, ahankara and the five tanmatras cause certain effects, themselves being effects of certain causes. The eleven senses and the five gross elements are the effects of certain causes and not themselves the causes of anything which is substantially different from them.

The main tendency of the Sankhya with regard to the problem of God, is to do away with the theistic belief. It asserts that the existence of God cannot be proved in any way. However, some Sankhya commentators and writers try to show that the system admits the existence of God as the supreme person who is the witness and not the creator of the world.

The Yoga System

The Yoga System was founded by the sage Patanjali. It accepts the epistemology and the metaphysics of the Sankhya, but also admits the existence of God. The system provides the practice of yoga as a means to the attainment of vivekajnaana or discriminative knowledge. Yoga consists in the cessation of all mental functions (chitta vritti nirodha).

This system describes certain techniques under eight stages. The stages are as follows:-

(1) Yama (restraints)
(2) Niyama (discipline)
(3) Asana (postures of the body)
(4) Pranayama (rythm of respiration)
(5) Protyahar (emancipation of sensory activity from the domination of exterior objectss)
(6) Dharana (concentration)
(7) Dhyana (meditation)
(8) Samadhi (trance-contemplation)

Though the practices of the different stages seem mechanical, but they are not so in the totality. The first two stages constitute the necessary preliminaries for the aspirant, while the others are gradual developmental and evolutionary stages.

(1) Yama (the restraints):-

This is meant to purify the psyche of the individual. It sets out the following principles ahimsa (non-violence);
satya (truth);
asteya (not to steal);
brahmcharya (sexual abstinence);
aparigraha (non-avariciousness).

Here the ahimsa (non-violence) means not only non-killing, but also not to cause pain to any entity, at any place, at any time, by any means.

The purpose is to keep one's mind away from the thoughts of such type. The satya (truth or veracity) checks the tongue. The person should not use confused, deceitful and harmful words in order to communicate. Thus all should speak the truth and for the good of all. The asteya (not to steal) is there to help people to abstain from the desire to steal and not only the act of stealing. "Brahmcharya" has been included to preserve the secret generative force. This preserving helps in channelising the energy in an upward direction. "Aparigraha" (absence of avarice) means nonappropriation of the things that are not one's own. This helps in the ability to discard the desire and attachment for possessions. The practice of "Yama" purifies one's mental state and helps in the preparation for the next stages.

(2) Niyama (disciplines):-

This stage makes the yogin disciplined by the following five observances:-

shancha (purity),
santosha (contentment),

tapas (practices leading to the body and mind perfection) swadhyaya (study towards the self) (Ishwara-prasudhana (surrender to the Ultimate)

Shancha is the purity of the body and the mind. There are various means to purify the internal and external cleanliness of the body which are easy to observe. But, the purity of the mind is not easily achieved and a discrimination and mindfulness in the form of awareness of one's thoughts is required. "Santosha" or contentment is being satisfied with the resources at hand and also not desiring for more. "Tapas" or asceticism is practising a simple life which is free from sensual indulgence, regulated fasting, chanting the name of God and serving one's fellow men. It is a balance between the opposites of life. "Swadhyaya" begins with the pursuits and logic of the intellect. Thus man becomes rational and conscious, then the spiritual truth is unfolded unto him. "Ishwara pranidhana" means the total surrender and it can be achieved only through time, sincerity and great perseverance.

(3) Asanas (the postures):-

The asanas or the postures give the body a stability and agreeability. But this is possible only after a long period of consistent practice. The "asanas" are of two kinds—asanas for physical well-being and the asanas for mental health and meditation.

Shirshasana, Sarvangasana, Halasan, etc. are the 'asanas' for the body while Padmasana, Siddhasana, Sukhasana, etc. are for the practice of meditation.

By the practice of asanas, the complete physical harmony is achieved and it helps immensely in achieving one-pointedness of the mind.

(4) Pranayama (rhythm of respiration):-

This is the most important yogic stage. It is the movement and arrest of inhalation and exhalation. It is very scientific and technical. It regulates the lungs and the vital energy of "prana" is released in the process. In Pranayama, the yogin seeks to attain direct knowledge of the pulsating and vibrating inner life of his own. It is a practice of the means of awakening. By this practice, the yogi experiences a unique joy and transcends time. It should be practised under the guidance of a competent teacher.

(5) "Pratyahara" (sense-withdrawal)

In this stage, the yogi makes a deliberate effort to diminish the impulses streaming in through the senses. The yogi makes efforts to establish a control over the senses which restrains the communication of external impressions to the mind. In fact, by the practice of the earlier four stages, the sense-withdrawal becomes naturally facilitated on its own. The mind, then attains a sense of detachment from the external world.

(6) Dharana (concentration)

Dharana or the practice of concentration is the stage which the yogin reaches after the complete control over his psychosomatic movements. He is no longer distracted or even disturbed by the senses, the mind or the memory, etc. His activity is all suspended.

Now he can practice the processes of this stage. Concentration means "fixing the mind on a single point." The yogi, after sitting in any of the meditative postures, fixes his mind and thoughts on one single point. The point may be the tip of the nose (the "nesikagne") or the eybrow centre (the "bhrumadhya").

It may be a subtle point like the centre of the navel, the lotus of the heart, the point of light within the head.

Thus for the Dharana, a definite object in the form of a point is (somewhat) essential. However, in a few cases, the practice can be done without such a point.

(7) Dhyana (Meditation):-

"Dhyana" or meditaion can be understood as the uninterrupted flow of the mind towards one object. It involves a definite conscious effort also. For, through concentration, the steadiness of the mind is achieved and it becomes one-pointed. In "Dhyana" the conscious mind is to be stilled, through the process of the earlier stages of the yoga.

The goal of the meditation is to experience the Supreme Self. The Supreme Self is pure consciousness, and to experience Him means to attain a state of Ultimate Knowledge and bliss. This state is a state beyond space, time, causation and the experience. The yogi becomes conscious of each and every movement or vibration which is caused in him, though he is not affected by it. He becomes able to pierce through the gross objects as well as the subtle ones, thereby reaching the last stage of samadhi.

(8) Samadhi (Trance-Contemplation):-

"Samadhi" is the last of the eight stages of the yoga. This is the superconscious state in which different experiences occur to the yogi. In the "savikalpa" samadhi, the mind of the yogi experiences the object of the meditation. In the "nirvikalpa" samadhi, one gains the knowledge of his own self. He identifies himself with the cosmic self. The seer becomes one with the seen. There remains no difference between the knower and the knowledge. The yogi attains the true knowledge of the cosmic self and becomes one with Him.

The Yoga System is also called the theistic (seshvara) Sankhya, to distinguish it from the Kapila Sankhya which is regarded as atheistic (nirishvara). God is considered as the highest object of contemplation for concentration and self-realisation. The arguments for the existence of God go like this:

Anything that is divided into degrees must also have a maximum degree. Thus knowledge is divided into degrees. There must be such a thing as perfect knowledge also. He who has this perfect knowledge or omniscience is God.

The Mimamsa System

This school was founded by Jaimini. Its main objective is the justification of Vedic rituals. The Mimamsa formulates the theory that the Vedas are not the works of any person, therefore they are free from human errors. The Vedas are eternal. The written form of the Vedas are only temporary manifestations or theories particular to seers. The Mimamsa discusses the theory of knowledge which shows that the validity of every knowledge is self-evident. The commands of the Vedas to perform one's duty is dharma. What is forbidden there is wrong.

The soul is an immortal eternal substance. The Mimamsa writers refute the materialistic view that there is nothing other than the body. According to them, the liberated soul has no actual consciousness, though it has the potentiality for it.

According to one school of the Mimamsa founded by Prabhakara, the soul has five different sources of knowledge. They are perception (pratyaksa), inference (anumana), comparison (upamana), testimony (sabda) and postulation (arthapatti). Another school of the Mimansa was founded by Kumarila Bhatta. This school admits that there is another source of knowledge and that is the soul in addition to the five mentioned. It is non-cognition (anupalabdhi).

The Mimamsa believes in the reality of the physical world, the strength of which is perception, Thus, it is a realistic philosophy. Even though it believes in the reality of soul, but it does not believe that there is a supreme soul, or God as the creator of the world. It says that the world has neither a beginning nor an end. On the basis of the potency which arises in the soul of a person who performs rituals, he can enjoy their fruits hereafter.

The Vedanta System

As the name suggests, this system arises out of the culmination of the Vedic speculation. (Vedanta—the end of the Vedas). Developing through the Upanishads, it was systematised in the Brahma-sutra of Badarayana. The commentaries on these sutras were written by many subsequent writers among whom Sankara and Ramanuja are well-known.

The Vedanta, as interpreted by Sankara, has the greatest influence on Indian life and it still persists in different parts of India. According to Sankara, God is the only Reality. This is the truth the Vedanta brings home. God is the Reality, not simply in the sense that there is nothing except God, but also in the sense that there is no multiplicity in Him. The world is explained not as a real creation, but as an appearance which God conjures up with his inscrutable power, Maya. Maya can be interpreted with the help of the experience of illusion, when a rope appears as a snake. In all such experiences of illusion there is a substratum or a reality on which something else is imagined or superimposed owing to the ignorance of the substratum. Similarly, we perceive the many objects in the One Brahman (God) on account of our ignorance (avidya) which conceals the real Brahman from us and makes it appear as the many objects. This ignorant attitude of ours is due to the magical power of Maya. Maya as a power of God is no more different from God. There is, then, no dualism but pure monism (advaita).

Sankara distinguishes the two different views of looking at the world. The first, who are unenlightened people, regard the world as real. Their view is called vyavaharika or a practical point of view. From this point of view, God is thought to be the omnipotent and omniscient creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world. He appears as qualified (saguna), and is called Saguna Brahman or Ishvara. The second standpoint is the real (paramarthika) view that of the enlightened who have realised that the world is an appearance and that there is nothing but God. The world, then becomes unreal and God is realised as the One without any internal distinction, or quality. He is indeterminate and void of characteristics. He is called Nirguna Brahaman. This real standpoint is possible only by the removal of ignorance and can be effected only by knowledge. This knowledge is imparted by the Vedanta. One must control the senses and the mind, give up all attachment to objects, with the realisation that they are transitory in nature, and have an earnest desire for liberation. Then he should study the Vedanta under an enlightened teacher and try to realise its truths by constant reasoning and meditation. The teacher would tell him at last: "Thou art Brahman" (Tat tvam asi). On this we should meditate, till we have a direct and permanent realisation: "I' am Brahman" (Aham Brahmasmi). By this realisation one would be liberated from bondage.

Chapter 11

SAINTS AND SEERS

What is abundant may not be worth taking note of and what is rare may not be possible to comprehend. Thus, like any other rarity, 'saints and their lives' are also very difficult to write about. But, in order to know how they managed to contribute to this planet, we are giving a brief sketch here of a few of the numerous Hindu saints and seers of India. The object is to arouse a curiosity in the reader's mind about their philosophy of life in order to make one think and act. The life, work and philosophy of the following saints and seers are presented as follows:

1. Sankaracharya
2. Ramanujacharya

3. Gyaneswar
4. Kabir
5. Surdas
6. Chaitanya
7. Tulsidas
8. Dadu
9. Tukaram
10. Ramdas
11. Swaminarayan
12. Dayanand
13. Ramakrishna
14. Shraddhananda
15. Vivekananda

16. Aurobindo
17. Ram Tirtha
18. Raman Maharishi
19. J.Krishnamurthi
20. Sai Baba

Sankarcharya:

Jagtguru Sankarcharya was one of the most living revivers of Vedic culture in India. His attempts to culturally unite the country in his short life span are unmatched even to this day.

Born in a Brahmin family at Kaladi in Kerala in 788 A.D., he mastered the Hindu scriptures. He renounced the world while he was an adolescent and travelled throughout country. His contribution lay in the task of reforming and reviving Hinduism at the time when the Indian society was deeply entrenched in many ills, conservative ideas and religious fanaticism. He composed many religious and spiritual books such as *Vivek-Chudamani*, *Brahmasutra*, *Geeta Bhasya*, *Manish Panchakam*, *Prabodh Sudhakar* and *Samvedanta-Sidhanta Sangraha*. He propounded the Advaita philosophy. His own life's belief has been explained by him in his compositions. The philosophy given by him is a tradition now and he attained Samadhi at the young age of 32.

Briefly, we can mention the central principles of Sankaracharya's teachings as follows:

(i) The eternal and impersonal absolute Braḥman is the only Ultimate Reality;

(ii) Maya creates the delusion which gives the appearance of the unchanging Reality as changing with the conditions of time and space;

(iii) The man's spirit is the same as the supreme spirit;

(iv) The reason of our sins and sufferings is the ignorance of our identity;

(v) Moksha or the final liberation could be had through jnana (knowledge), through karma (action) and bhakti (devotion) are subsidiary ways to it.

Ramanujacharya

Born in 1018 A.D., Ramanujacharya was a saint philosopher. He founded the Vishishta dvaita Siddhanta. *Sribhasya* and *Gitabhasya* are two of his commentaries on the Vedanta.

In the Vishishtadvaita or modified monism, the Ultimate Reality, God has been called Brahman. Here, God, soul and matter—all three are considered real, but God is the inner substance. Soul and matter are the attributes of God and are absolutely dependent on God. God Himself does not undergo any change. Only his body, the Act is transformed into the world under his own control and guidance. He manifests himself in five different forms, viz. Para, Vyuha, Vibhava, Antaryamin and Pratima. With love, remembrance, and constant thought of God comes the complete surrendered feeling, which leads to Moksha (or entry into the Lord's abode) by the Prakrti.

Ramanujacharya's philosophy is one of the basic philosophies of Hinduism.

Saint Gyaneswar

Saint Gyaneswar was born to a socially ostracised father Vithal Pant and mother Rukmini. Like his father, he was also a great scholar. His intense inclination in the study of scriptures and religious practices shone in the extraordinary brilliance of his preachings. He composed *Gyaneswari* at the age of fourteen only. It is a philosophical treatise written in Marathi.

Born in 1275 A.D., he spent his childhood in Trimakeshwar. Later he came to Newa and learnt as many as 56 languages. He travelled a lot and preached the *Gita*. He attained Samadhi in 1296 A.D. at Alandi.

Saint Gyaneswar or Gyandeva emphasised the importance of bhakti (devotion). According to him, bhakti is that in which one thinks of nothing except God; refuses to hear anything except His name; serves none but God and meditates on nothing except God.

Kabir

Kabir, a disciple of Ramananḍa, was one of the most outstanding mystics of the times. Born in 1398 A.D., he was brought up in a weaver family at Varanasi. He also earned his living by weaving, and lived the life of a householder. His bhajans (songs of devotion) convey a moral and spiritual message to the world. He denounced the worldliness, the life of sense pleasures, sectarianism, formal religious practices and unrighteous conduct. He worshipped God as the formless one (Nirguna), giving him the names of both Rama and Rahim. He taught universal brotherhood and condemned the caste and religious distinctions. According to him, the ultimate goal of the human soul was unity with God. He attracted both Hindus and Muslims as his followers. Dharanidasa, one of his leading followers, who had forsaken all his worldly fortune to lead a spiritual life, formed the Dharmadasi branch of the Kabir Pantha in Madhya Pradesh. This great saint (Kabir) gave up his body in 1518 A.D.

Surdas

Born blind in 1478 A.D., Haribhakta came as a proof of the Miraculous Almighty. Though he never saw the world of light, colour and form, yet with his inner vision he portrayed in exquisite poetry the life of Lord Krishna.

His masterpiece composition, *Sursagar*, contains about eight thousand songs. Here, at many places, he identifies himself with Radha or any other Gopika who has immense love for Krishna. He longed for bhakti, love and adoration for Krishna even at the cost of any 'yoga' or jnana. Thus, when the great yogi Uddhav reached Braj as a messenger of Krishna, he wanted him to go away. He said:

"O! Uddhav, remain silent if you have a desire to live among us. Do not preach the 'yoga' of yours here." Thus, we see an intense and unfathomable love and adoration in the heart of this saint poet for Krishna. He died in 1581 A.D.

Chaitanya

Caitanya or Gauranga, born in 1486 A.D., was a great mystic and philosopher. He was only twenty-two, when he got recognition as a scholar and a successful teacher. The transformation was the effect of the influence of the Vaishnava saint, Isvara Puri. His own experience about himself was the mystic love of Radha and the Gopis towards Krishna. He spread the message of spontaneous love or raga-marga for salvation. God, according to Chaitanya, is Krishna. He is infinite love and bliss. He is full of infinite power and consciousness. He is an abode of contrary qualities. The world is a manifestation of the power of God. He lives in the highest heaven which is beyond the spheres of Prakriti, though he is all-pervading. According to Chaitanya, the world is real and a manifestation of the power of creativity of God. Bhakti, according to him, is the only means of liberation. Chaitanya died in 1533.

Chaitanya wrote no philosphical treatise. His philosophical views are contained in *Chaitanyacharitamrta,* his biography. Various commentaries were written by his disciples to expound his tenets. *Govind Bhasya*, *Vjjvalanilamani* and *Bhaktirasamrtasindhu* are the three most important commentaries.

Ramadasa: A seeker since his childhood, Ramadasa was born in 1608 A.D. He kept on wandering for years in search of spiritual light till he attained siddhi (realisation). Then he settled down at Chafal in Satara district. He sought to combine spiritual and practical life, and evinced interest in politics also. Sivaji received the inspiration to overthrow Muslim authority from him. Ramadasa established ashramas all over Maharashtra. He composed abhangas (a type of verse) and wrote a didactic work *Dasabodha*, to spread the message of bhakti (devotion) and jnana (knowledge). His "Dasabodha" comprises views on all aspects of life.

Tulsidas: The most popular epic on Rama, *Ramacharitmanas* was composed about four centuries ago. But the bhakti (devotion) represented in it is so penetrating that no one can remain ignorant of the poet, Tulsidas, who wrote it.

Born in 1506, as a poor Brahmin he got little education. But his works are very mature and unique. This has origin in his love and adoration for his 'ishta devata' (chosen deity) Rama. He is believed to have visions of God. In his verses in *Ramacharitmanas, Vinaypatrika* and *Kavitavali* he has expressed not only this love but also shows the path for every Hindu. His "bhajans" are a source of inspiration and create a bhaktibhava (feeling of devotion) in the listener.

His path of realisation is Archana worship of God. He was a bhakta by heart, mind and soul. The piety of saint Tulsidas is rare.

Dadu Dayala : Dadu Dayala was also an exponent of the Nirguna school. Though his parentage is uncertain, it is accepted that he was born in 1544 at Ahmedabad. From his boyhood, he was spiritually inclined. And this led him to leave his home in search of God when he was only twelve. After much wandering, he settled down in Naraina, where he earned his livelihood by carding cotton. Like Kabir, he also discarded the limitations of caste and creed. He also practised the teachings of Kabir. He exhorted his followers not to distinguish between Hindus and Muslims. He died in 1603 and his soul remained untouched by the good and bad of this world.

Tukaram (1607-1649): Born as a "saint", Tukaram, lived only to ufold his sainthood. He fought with poverty and misery since his childhood. But his life shows the successful rising of a human being to the divine stature.

Saint Tukaram chose his path of bhakti as "dasya bhava". He identified himself only as a 'dasa' (servant) to his feet. He was a great devotee. He preached this gospel of devotion through the devotional songs. His verses are in the form of "Ovis" and "Abhangas". The listener finds comfort and solace in them. He believed in God and with this unflinching faith he boldly declared, "Repeat the Name of the Lord and weep before Him. He shall come to you."

Swaminarayan: Born in Ayodhya in 1781, Lord Swaminarayan, renounced home at the age of 11. He embarked on a spiritual pilgrimage on foot and travelled the country for 7 years. After his initiation at the age of 19, he settled in Gujarat.

He established a sect called 'Swaminarayan Sampradaya' in the tradition of 'bhakti sampradaya'. He was worshipped as God, in his own lifetime and died at the age of 49 in 1830.

Swaminarayan stressed purity of heart to realise God. And to attain such piety, he gave a discipline of five codes. They are:

(i) No addictions;
(ii) No illicit sex;
(iii) No stealing;
(iv) A pure vegetarian diet; and

(v) A personal purity

According to his explanation, the soul (Jiva) is cloaked by ignorance (maya). By removing this ignorance the soul is liberated, in which a God-realised Guru helps him.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati: This great modern saint was an iconoclast by heart. He gave the slogan of "Back to the Vedas."

Born in 1824 at Morvi in Gujarat, his childhood name was Mool Shankar. He was above the mundane since his childhood. He left his home on being forced to marry. He reached Mathura and studied the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures. He was opposed to religious hypocrisy and showed remarkable courage in decrying the social evils prevalent in the society in the name of religion. He wrote a treatise on the

Vedas and his other works are *Satyarth Prakash, Rigved Bhumika*, etc. He died in 1883 A.D. He founded the 'Arya Samaj' with a view to propagate the Sanatana Dharma and its practices.

Sri Ramakrishna: The God-man of modern India, Sri Ramakrishna, was born in 1836 in Calcutta. His parents were religious and pious people of a rural background. He was healthy but a restless boy. He was intelligent and a child prodigy. But the listening to recitations of stories from Hindu mythology and epics was his greatest delight.

His inner urge to see God was so immense that he used to go into a state of samadhi, or trance, many times since his childhood. But to make him mundane, and to save him from living an indifferent worldly life, he was married to

Saradamai. Although, he, by some unknown call, reached Dakshineswar and as soon as he crossed the threshold of the Kali temple he found himself again in the whirlwind. There he was helped by a Brahmin woman and it was she who first recognised in him a power to transmit spirituality to others. After some time he realised an inner calmness and appeared to others as a normal person. He became a Master who could speak with authority regarding the ideas and ideals of the various religions of the world. He said, "I have practised all religions and I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths."

About spirituality he made certain general conclusions. The first of them was that all religions are true and he talked of the harmony of religions.

On August 15, 1886, the Master attained Mahasamadhi. The realisations of Sri Ramakrishna are the fulfilment of long spiritual yearning of the Hindus. Swami Vivekananda, his dearest disciple, applied the Master's teachings to the solution of the problems by which the world is beset today. Knowingly or unknowingly, his disciples and others admire Sri Ramakrishna's universal teachings.

Swami Shraddhananda: Swami Shraddhananda, a spiritual seeker of the nineteenth century, was born as Munni Ram. Though an atheist in his youth, he became an ascetic later.

He worked for the society and founded the Gurukul Kangri. The purpose behind it was to revive the ancient Gurukul system, which has been the very foundation of gaining knowledge in our country. He was born in 1859 A.D. in a very rich family. But the urge within led him to leave and sacrifice all he owned to humanity. He died in 1926 A.D.

Swami Vivekananda: Swami Vivekananda can be said to be the representative of the spiritual side of the modern Indian renaissance. He was a giant spiritual.

Narendranath Datta (Swamiji's childhood name) was born on January 12, 1863 in Calcutta to Shri Vishwanath Datta. He had his early education at home and graduated from the Presidency College. He also took a law degree but the will of destiny was something else. The spiritual influence of Sri Ramakrishna changed this 'rationalist and agnostic', and he became his closest disciple.

After the Mahasamadhi of Sri Ramakrishna he echoed his master's realisations of the harmony of religions. His address to the Parliament of Religions on September 11, 1893 at Chicago was a message of India to the world. He also propagated the message of Advaita Vedanta in other countries. Later on, he founded the Ramakrishna Mission, and the Ramakrishna Math at Belur. The purpose of the Ramakrishna Mission is to raise the masses by making them aware of their individuality.

This brilliant light went out on July 4, 1902, when Swamiji had spent only 39 years of his mortal existence. His famous works include *Karmyoga, Jnanayoga,* and various commentaries on Hindu philosophy. He believed and practised Advaita Vedanta of Hinduism. He is one of the most celebrated exponents of Hinduism after Sankaracharya.

Sri Aurobindo : Aurobindo Ghose was born in Calcutta on August 15, 1872. He completed his primary education in Darjeeling and later in England. He was 18, when he passed the ICS, but feeling no call for it, left it. By 20, he had achieved rare academic distinctions. He also worked as a revolutionary activist in the Indian Freedom Struggle. But all through his life, he had always been inclined to ask: "What do they know of love and service who only themselves love and serve?" The desire to know the answer to this made him leave this mundane world and he went to Pondicherry where he stayed till his death.

He practised yoga, parted from his wife, his friends, his colleagues and started efforts to solve the human problem. In his search in this direction, he invented another technique for human evolution "Integral Yoga". This atma-siddhi (self-realisation) changed his outlook and he started working for humanity.

He considered man as a link between the first and the last forms of evolution. He believed that on the call of the earth and the answer from the supreme, the same man could evolve as the superman. He called such a life the divine life. He wrote scores of books on the contemporary thoughts and persons; on the scriptures; on the oriental ideas and ideals and so on. Some of his works are: *The Life Divine, The Yoga and Its Objects, The Ideal of the Karmayogin, The Renaissance of India, Savitri,* etc.

This great thinker, philosopher and saint died in 1950.

Swami Ram Tirth: Born as Tirtha Rama Goswami on October 22, 1873, in Punjab, Swami Rama Tirtha was a son of a poor priest. His life is a model lesson in many respects. He fought against heavy odds and made a mark as a student, as a professor, as a preacher, and as a saint. While he was still a student, he shaped his future consciously with that rare determination and self-confidence which only he could have.

He was a professor of Mathematics and a poet also! But he forsook all these works 'to find a larger one'. He went to the solitudes of the Himalayas to carry on spiritual researches. He practised sacrifice, service, purity, fearlessness, cheerfulness and he preached the same. He was very original in all he said and did and described himself as 'Balanced Recklessness'.

According to him, 'true religion is not belief in a God, but is a complete trust in the good in man....' His precepts and preachings are found in his letters, notebooks and lectures. He preached universal love and presence of God within. The saint died in 1906 at the age of only thirty-three years.

Raman Maharshi: The most saintly of modern Hindu ascetics and mystics and also one of the most intriguing, the sage of Arunachala, Ramana Maharshi gave the philosophy known for its purity and gentleness.

Born in 1879 to an Aiyar family, 'Venkataraman' (Ramana) was a scholar but showed no particular aptitude for his studies. Though not good at his studies, he had a prodigious memory and an alert mind.

In his school days, once sitting alone, he felt the spiritual experience quite unexpectedly. This experience changed his outlook and behaviour. Later he abandoned his studies and set out to find his real self.

He travelled to various places and found that all the 'isms' or 'systems' meet at one point and that is the realisation. Realisation in the everyday sense is the knowledge of the fact that God is everything, and everything is God. He breathed his last in his Arunachala Ashram in 1950.

Sri Ramana did not write to instruct the world at large. Many of his teachings are verbal instructions on some point or the other, when requested by his devotees. He, however, wrote some verses in Tamil, Sanskrit, Malayalam and Telugu. Some of his works include *Self-enquiry; Who Am I?; Five Verses on the One Self,* etc. He taught the tradition of Advaita.

Jiddu Krishnamurti: Jiddu Krishnamurti was born to holy Brahmin parents of Chittoor district in 1895. He had the usual life as an ordinary Indian youth until he came to Adyar in 1909. There he came closer to the Theosophical Society and was called and treated as "Krishna" the Lord.

He practised the beliefs of the society which drew its inspirations from Indian scriptures. J. Krishnamurti was a man of intense curiosity and was very concerned about human creativity. He was a great liberated being in the Advaita tradition. Throughout his life, he continued to travel, to speak, to search for minds that are awakened and capable of perceiving with clarity. He was a living thinker and philosopher. For the chaotic life of today's world, he suggested "religiousness" as the last resort. He died in 1986.

Sri Satya Sai Baba: Born on November 23 at Puttaparthi, in the District Anantpur, the birth of this saint godman, as he is generally known, is a unique event.

~~He is~~ believed to be an incarnation of Shiva, by his devotees or followers. Though he got his education only upto high school, he is a man of letters By self-realisation he came to know his purpose of birth. He has dedicated himself to the service of mankind. According to him: "Service to mankind is service to God."

The Satya Sai Organisation, which runs under his patronage is working all over the world in the various fields of human development. The belief in the "harmony of religions" and "One God" is the guiding principle behind this Organisation. Sri Sai Baba has himself written several books on different aspects of life and man.

Hinduism is a great religion and a way of life for millions of people living in India, Nepal and many parts of the world. It is impossible to describe it in detail in one single volume. This book provides an introduction to Hindu tradition and philosophy and is meant for the general reader as it provides authentic knowledge of this ancient faith in a more easy to understand style. It deals with all the important facets of Hinduism. Its publication would go a long way in making this ancient religion comprehensible to the common man.

Swami Atmananda is a scholar-hermit living in the Himalayas.